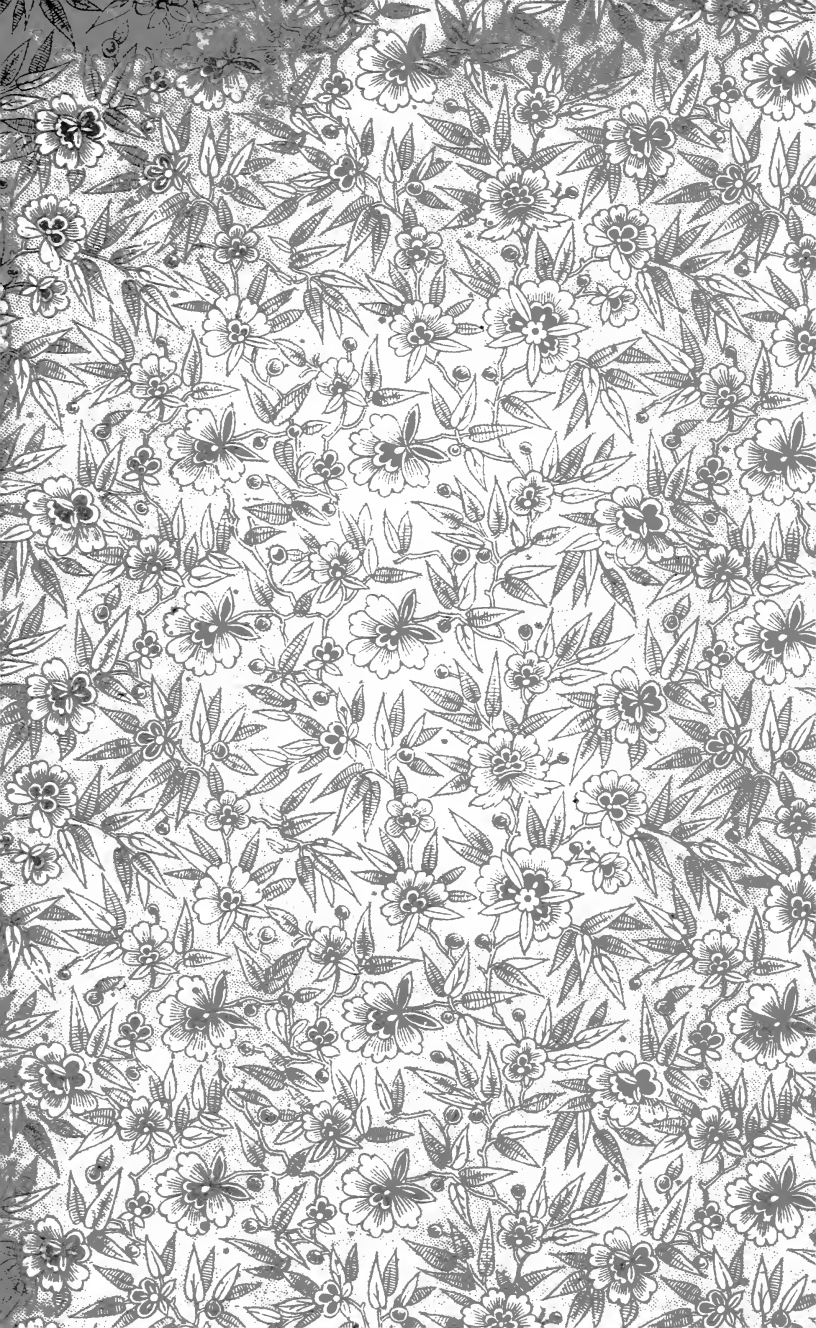


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ALLEGIANCE.

A Novel.

BY

IDA ASHWORTH TAYLOR,

AUTHOR OF 'VENUS'S DOVES,' 'SNOW IN HARVEST.'

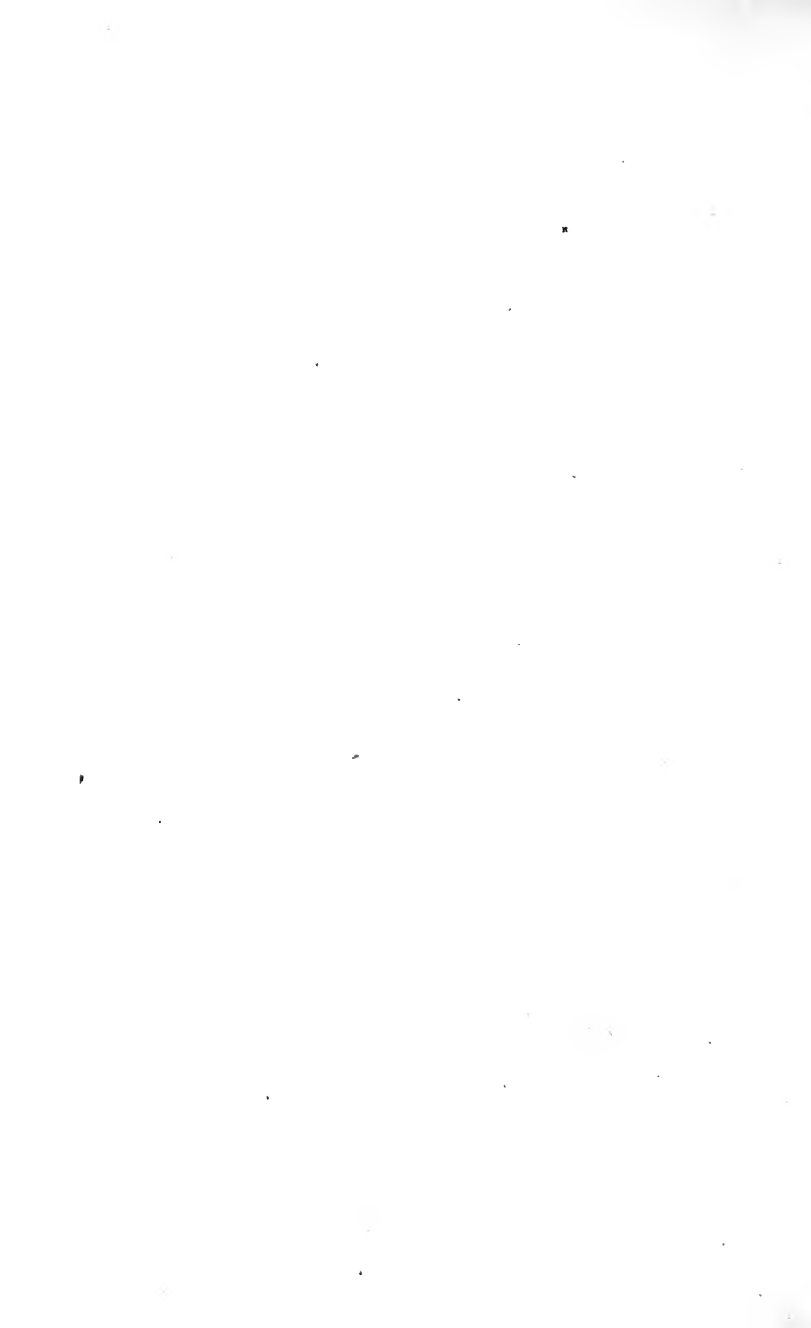
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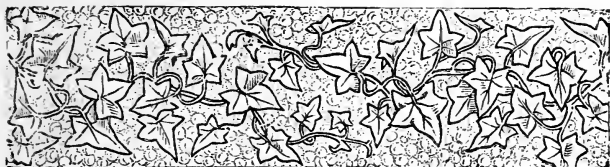
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ALLEGIANCE.

CHAPTER I.

MEANWHILE, whilst Verschoyle and Eve had been falling deeper and deeper into the snares that fate had set for their unwary feet, Mrs. Ross had been steadily approaching her goal, and was at last within sight of success in the plans and schemes which had been occupying her for the last few weeks.

She had returned to pay her second visit to Mrs. Smythe, and almost on her arrival had received a letter from Lord Ralston, who was

not to be there till some two or three days later, making her at length a definite offer of his hand. Some men would have deferred it till they could have made their proposal in person, but that would not have been Lord Ralston's way. To adopt the longest and most deliberate method was with him almost a principle, and in this case he stated his reasons.

‘I write instead of speaking,’ he said, ‘in order that you may not be hurried, or, taken unawares, give an answer on the impulse of the moment.’ In another man an expression of such a fear might have been taken for sarcasm, but Lord Ralston had never been known to employ it. ‘I wish you to consider the subject fully and at your leisure, and to give me an answer on my return on Thursday. I need not say how much I hope it may be a favourable one.’

When Mrs. Ross had first received the

letter, and indeed for some little time afterwards, she had enjoyed her triumph. The chase itself gives value to the prize ; she had worked industriously for it, and she felt a natural gratification in her success. Yet, as she sat in her room alone on the afternoon on which Lord Ralston was expected to return, her first flush of triumph over, she was annoyed to feel that success had its drawbacks. Even the shallowest natures are not exempt from human weaknesses, although perhaps it is only in the higher grades that they are fully developed, and that discontent becomes the rule instead of the exception. With Patricia one of the strongest principles upon which she systematically acted was to take the line or course of action which promised a fullest return in the shape of enjoyment, and having taken it, to avoid looking back on possible alternatives ; and as a general rule she did not find it difficult to act upon

that principle. Yet now, for the first time for months, the remembrance was persistently forcing itself upon her of the days of her brief engagement to Verschoyle; and for the first time those recollections, suddenly taking, most inopportunately, form and shape, were vexing her with their unwelcome memory. Involuntarily she contrasted him, as Eve had done, with the man she meant to marry, and felt, not regret or compunction for the course she had pursued, but an angry impatience with life which had forced such a course upon her.

Perhaps it was a sentence in Eve's letter of that morning which had suggested the comparison. Hitherto, with a reluctance—into the causes of which she did not examine—to name Gilbert to her sister, Miss Carrington had abstained from all mention of him or his visits; but in her last letter she had spoken of him casually, as she might of any other visitor,

and the occurrence of his name had produced a faint sense of disquiet in Mrs. Ross's mind. Why was he at Nortons? What was he doing there? She recalled Eve's first impulse of championship, her confidence in his innocence, and, not less significant, her absolute silence on the subject ever since, and a sharp, jealous pang shot through her. She did not love him, she had voluntarily given him up, and had no wish that they should ever meet again; but she could not contemplate even the remote possibility of his becoming attached to her sister without a sense of annoyance, which she told herself was purely unselfish. And yet, if he was visiting her, if her house alone in the neighbourhood was open to him, what was more likely to happen? She rose and walked over to the open window, and, leaning her arms on the window-sill, leant out whilst she tried to think, still with that feeling of restlessness and discontent at her heart. But her

thoughts would wander. The large park lay stretched out below ; some gardeners were rolling the gravel walks ; two of Mrs. Smythe's boys, heavy loutish lads, were quarrelling under her window ; whilst that lady herself, in her well-appointed carriage, was driving up the long approach. Mrs. Ross could not see her, but yet her face, tranquil, stolid, and self-satisfied—so like her brother's—was present in her mind, filling up the picture of opulence and riches and dullness ; and was it for this, to lead the same sort of existence, varied in her case by political life, in which, except as it placed her, through her husband, in a more prominent position, she took not the faintest interest—was it for this that she had schemed and planned?—was it this that had filled her with triumph when she had realized that she was approaching its attainment?

The carriage was coming nearer, and she

perceived with a start that Lord Ralston sat beside his sister—she had probably gone to the station to bring him back, or perhaps had met him by accident. Patricia drew back quickly. She was in a white wrapper, with her pretty light hair on her shoulders, and becoming though the *négligée* might be, she was fully aware that it was not the garb in which her future husband would prefer to view her; and she proceeded forthwith to dress for dinner, with the care natural to a woman who was preparing to meet, if not the man she loved, at least the man she intended to marry, dismissing as much as possible all disquieting reflections from her mind.

Two or three hours later she was in the library, where, dinner over, Lord Ralston had taken her, and had given him his answer.

She had no doubt, no hesitation as to what it should be; but, nevertheless, he had never appeared so unprepossessing, so commonplace

in her eyes—never had she been so conscious of his defects, negative as they were, as now when she compared him involuntarily with Verschoyle, careless though the love-making of the latter had been.

The remembrance of the day, now eight months ago, when Gilbert Verschoyle had asked her to marry him, would recur to her mind as pertinaciously as it was unwelcome. He had made his suggestion, even then, negligently, with no pretence of feeling more than he did. She remembered it all: the blue Italian sky overhead, the bright winter sunshine, the band playing below, the passers-by with their gay, ceaseless chatter, and Gilbert leaning one arm over the back of her chair, whilst his dark handsome face looked down at her.

‘Life is not apt to be much of a success in any case,’ he had said; ‘but together we might perhaps make a better thing of it than apart—don’t you think so?’

He had been fond of her, though half contemptuously, and in her shallow light way she had loved him as she answered yes. At any rate, for that day they had been happy. The sun had gone on shining, and the band playing, and the passers-by going to and fro, and she had been proud of him. But of course she had done quite right to break off her engagement. She had begun to entertain doubts of its wisdom even before the revelation was made which had finally decided her, and on sober reflection she knew that he was the very last man she would have chosen to marry; whereas Lord Ralston, standing before her steady, grave and kind, if a little self-occupied and certainly not brilliant, was a most desirable match—as he was, for the matter of that, proving to her in the most elaborate fashion. It was tiresome that Gilbert's image should so insist upon obtruding itself; but when she came back to the drawing-

room, half an hour after she had left it, there was nothing but satisfaction visible on her face.

‘Yes, your brother is good enough to wish me to marry him, and I have said yes,’ she said to Mrs. Smythe that evening when they had gone upstairs, and that lady had kissed and congratulated her in the most correct form. It was not the choice she would have made for her brother, but she had confidence in him, like all his family, and had, moreover, no more wish than power to interfere.

‘I am sure he will make an excellent husband, and that you will do your best to make him happy, my dear,’ she added.

‘I am sure I hope he will do his best to make me happy,’ corrected Mrs. Ross, but not aloud.

Outwardly she received her future sister-in-law’s congratulations with becoming gravity and decorum, escaping, however, to her own room with all possible celerity.

‘I wonder if it is worth it, after all!’ she said to herself, rejecting Élise’s aid, to that personage’s astonishment, and dismissing her at once. ‘Eve would say not; but then, what does she know of life? Robert loved me, and *that* certainly did not answer. Poor Robert, what an idealist he was! Idealists should not marry; when once the inevitable disillusionment has taken place they become unbearable. Gilbert was fond of me in his way—as fond as it was in him to be of anyone—and I liked him, but we should have been miserable together. Now Lord Ralston cares no more for me than I do for him, and I think there is every chance of our union turning out a success.’

With which consolatory reflection Mrs. Ross went to sleep. It was a little annoying that she persistently dreamt of Gilbert Verschoye.

* * * * *

When Verschoyle rode away, leaving Eve standing in the avenue, one idea stood out clear and prominent amid the confusion which reigned in his mind—the resolution, that is, that he would never come back.

It was not that General Cartwright's behaviour had thrown any new light on the matter. It was true he had resented, keenly and bitterly, the insult, offered, as it had been, in the presence of Eve; but he had already almost forgotten it. And yet it had been just the touch which was needed to rouse him to a sense of the impossibility of affairs remaining as they were; and had he hesitated further he would have been decided by what had followed, which had wakened all that was unselfish in him to life and action.

It was not that even now he allowed to himself that Eve Carrington loved him. Life had taught him—graven in him—a scepticism which as yet his knowledge of her, and the

purser higher views which she had unconsciously opened out to him, had only begun to shake; but, nevertheless, looking down at her face and reading its sadness, whilst he refused to decipher that which, deeper than sadness, was written in her eyes, he was conscious of a certain danger for her, as well as for himself, in their continued intimacy. Trouble and perplexity, at least, it could not fail to draw down upon her; he was sufficiently a man of the world to know that things could not go on as they had done of late without doing so; the scene of to-day was only a sample of what would follow; he would be using her generosity and pity to bring her into collision with her world, and he was at once too proud and too chivalrous to accept such a sacrifice. No, he had said good-bye to her, and had said it, as he reflected with melancholy pride, without letting her discover by word or sign what she had become to

him ; and now they had parted, and it was over. She should never have the grief of knowing the injury she had unwittingly done him, or guess that her hand, instead of lightening, had made his lot tenfold harder than before. They had parted. They might of course meet again ; the chances of life might bring them once more face to face, but never in the close intercourse of friend with friend. Her old habits would, he being removed from her path, resume their old sway ; old friendships, old influences would regain any power they might have lost ; she would marry Courtney—he knew it—the brother of the man she had loved, and her brief friendship with himself, the outcast, would be remembered merely as an episode in the serious history of her life. He resolutely faced the facts, and swore to himself that he would not lift a finger to avert the end which he foresaw.

As to his own future, he turned with a weary impatience from its contemplation. What would it be? he could not tell—he did not even greatly care. He was content to leave Time, that great arbiter of all our destinies, to settle his. Yet, try as he might to ignore it, he knew that for better or for worse that future was changed; as he had been he could never be again. Before, through all that had befallen him, he had at least been able to take refuge in a bitter scepticism. If the life he was leading was low and unworthy, without aims or ideals, at least none other was possible—so he had told himself; if he had not even found happiness, he had at least the consolation—poor as it was—of a doubt whether it were to be found at all. But how would it be when he returned to that life, stripped as before of all that was ennobling, and weighted with the additional consciousness of what it might

have been, with the memory and the possibility haunting him of one higher and better, but to which the road was for him barred? However it might be, he told himself he had no choice ; once again, what was best in him stood as the angel guarding the doors of Eden. He would never win his Eve by dragging her out of the garden to share his world of thorns and briars and thistles.

He was a strong man and a resolute one, and having decided on his course he did his best to carry it out loyally, to forget as far as was possible what might have tempted him from it, and to throw himself into the other interests and pursuits open to him, entering upon the struggle with a hard determination characteristic of the man. He rode, studied farming, read, shot, indefatigably, and even attempted to take an interest in Dorothy, feeling a passing compassion for the dreary emptiness of the child's life, scarcely lessened

by the fact that she was herself unconscious of any occasion for it. He had seen more of her of late, and though he had no suspicion of the sort of attachment which she was developing towards himself, and which would, indeed, had he guessed it, have been regarded by him rather as an embarrassment than in any other light, he was beginning to feel a certain sense of duty towards her. He had even been roused to slight amusement by Miss Hare's evident disapprobation of the terms of increased intimacy upon which they stood, and the transparent and flimsy excuses which she was in the habit of inventing in order to prevent any intercourse between them taking place which might tend to throw her pupil in any greater degree under the influence of her brother. When, about a week after his final visit to Nortons, he announced his intention of taking the child for a drive, he listened to the plausible objections advanced by Miss

Hare in silence, and then turned to the governess with suspicious suavity.

‘In fact, you think Dorothy had better not come?’ he asked.

‘I do indeed, Mr. Verschoyle. It is very good of you, but——’

‘I am sorry to be obliged to differ with you,’ replied Dorothy’s guardian courteously, ‘but I wish her to do so.’

He had asserted his authority, and Miss Hare, indignant as she was, had nothing to do but to submit. He turned away with a slight smile, which faded, however, almost as it came.

The drive was not a success. Gilbert was preoccupied and silent, and Dorothy glanced at him from time to time with covert uneasiness. She disapproved of her brother scarcely less than before; but, notwithstanding her disapproval, she had attached herself to him in a certain undemonstrative way of her own, and his indifference to her was a sore point with the

child. Uniform though careless as was his kindness, she knew that Ben, his dog, was more to him than she was, and she was not mistaken. Gilbert was a hard man, and life had not softened him ; his stepmother's child had no place in his affections, and he would not pretend that she had. And yet she was fond of her brother ; she had noticed the change that the last few days had worked in him—the more so that, quite unconscious of her observation, he had made no special efforts to disguise or conceal it—and now as she glanced at him, wrapped in his own reflections, she remarked the worn look about his eyes and the harassed expression of the whole face, with a wish, which yet she dared not gratify, to ask him what was wrong. Perhaps she was not altogether without her own suspicions on the subject, for though small and childish, Dorothy was already fifteen, and, as has been said, not at any rate behind her age in worldly wisdom. Had

Miss Carrington refused him, she speculated. She would not have wondered, nor indeed blamed her, had such been the case; but she was sorry for Gilbert, nevertheless. She tried a bold stroke.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked, as they turned out of the lodge-gates. ‘To Nortons?’

‘No, not there,’ answered Gilbert rather curtly. ‘Where do you wish to go?’

‘I don’t care, unless we went there,’ persisted Dorothy. ‘I should like to go to Nortons. I——’

Gilbert interrupted her.

‘I thought I had told you I was not going there. Shall we go to Broom Hill? I have to see a man about a horse, and we might do it to-day.’

Dorothy made no further remonstrance, but she drew her inferences no less, and meditated upon them during the remainder of the drive.

When they reached home Mr. Erskine was

standing at the door, waiting till his ring should be answered, and he turned at the sound of wheels.

‘Ah, Verschoyle!’ he said, ‘I was coming to call upon you. I have been unlucky lately. You are always out. How are you, Miss Dorothy?’

Indisposed for visitors as he was, Gilbert responded with sufficient cordiality, and was leading the way to the library when his eye was caught by a letter lying on the table in the hall. It had been brought by the afternoon post, and had been placed there by the butler to await his return. As he saw it he started slightly. He had never received a letter from Eve Carrington, nor, as far as he was aware, had he seen her handwriting; but yet even before he had touched it he knew that it was from her. He took it up, and with it in his hand he followed his guest into the library.

‘Don’t let me prevent you reading your letter,’ said Mr. Erskine cheerfully; he was a man who carried perpetual cheerfulness almost to the verge of offensiveness, pleasant in other respects though he was. He was evidently settling himself for a long visit. He had put down his hat, and arranged himself comfortably in a chair.

‘Thank you,’ said Verschoyle quietly, laying it on the chimney-piece, and turning to his guest; ‘it can wait.’

Gilbert talked well that day, almost brilliantly. Mr. Erskine thought what good company he was, and gave an involuntary additional regret to the circumstances which excluded him from the society of the neighbourhood, as he sat smoking the cigar with which his host had supplied him, and almost forgetting for the time his pastoral avocations in the discussion of more mundane affairs; though he made a praiseworthy attempt from

time to time to return to his more proper sphere.

‘Do you see that Farrell is just dead?’ he asked; ‘he will be a great loss to the country.’

‘What, the philanthropist? Yes, I suppose he will,’ answered Gilbert. ‘Philanthropists always remind me of flies and other noisome insects. We are told, and of course believe, that they are essential to the well-being of the universe at large, however unpleasant they may be to the individual. Ah,’ as Mr. Erskine attempted a remonstrance, ‘perhaps you have had no personal experience of them. *I* once fell into the hands of one of the race. I fancy there must have been a scarcity of criminals just then, so deep and constant was the interest he took in me—it left me with a horror of the species.’

When Mr. Erskine at last rose to take leave, with a pleasant and unusual sense of

having enjoyed a forbidden pleasure, Verschoyle went with him to the door and detained him for a few minutes in conversation ; stopping, when he was gone, to caress Ben, who was asleep in the hall, before he returned to the library, and took up the letter lying on the mantelpiece. Even then he held it some minutes in his hand before breaking the seal. When he did so, it did not take long to read.

‘ Dear Mr. Verschoyle,’ Eve wrote,—‘ Will you come and see me ? I cannot believe that because of one unhappy chance you will not come again, and yet I cannot help thinking that was your meaning when you left me. It was not my fault—you know it. Will you not come ?—Yours sincerely, Eve Carington.’

So ran the short note, that was so like herself that he almost heard her soft voice as he read, expostulating with him for thus, as she

imagined, resenting an injury. 'It was not her fault.' What *was* her fault? everything and nothing.

Long he remained motionless, his elbows on the table and the letter before him as he stared down at it. At last he rose.

'My darling, why do you ask me?' he muttered. 'Why do you not let me alone? I was doing my best. I——' he broke off. 'I can't do it,' he said a moment later. 'She does not know what she asks. I can't do it.'

He took up the letter, and tearing it into fragments, threw it away.





CHAPTER II.

‘**I**S it not a long time since Mr. Verschoyle was here?’ asked Miss Duke one afternoon. She and Eve were alone together in the drawing-room. The weather was again fine, and outside the sun was shining. The girl looked up with a start from the book which lay on her knee.

‘It is—a long time,’ she answered, a little breathlessly.

‘Ah, well,’ said the old lady deprecatingly, ‘perhaps it is best. Sometimes I have thought, though I never said so, that he might be here—too much.’

Miss Duke's tone was gentle, even apologetic, but Eve shivered as she answered.

'I do not think that he will come again,' she answered in her low voice.

Miss Duke looked across at her quickly, a question hovering on her lips; but she did not put it, and a few minutes later she rose and left the room.

It was more than ten days since Gilbert and Eve had parted. Patricia was expected home in two or three days more. Four days ago he had received the letter it had cost her so much to write, and he had made no sign in answer—neither coming nor writing. All those days she had been waiting, looking for him; the opening of a door, the sound of a bell had been sufficient to make her heart stand still, but now she had given up hope. He had not come; he did not mean to come; it was plain. She did not judge him; she was not angry nor resentful—or if she was, it

was not with him but with others—but she was supremely unhappy. She told herself that if she could have seen him but once more she would have been content ; if she could have told him, just for once, in plain language—though surely he knew it already—that however [^]others might misjudge him, whatever might be the insults they might offer him, she, at least, had never doubted nor mistrusted him. Why, she asked herself with vain and purposeless regret, why had she not done so before ? what had sealed her lips from such a confession of her faith ? Surely their friendship had, at least, been close enough to have given her the right to break silence and to tell it him, once for all ? But now the opportunity was gone, and might never return ; she would go through life haunted by the possibility that in the hours—she knew him well enough to know that they were not few—when bitterness got the upper hand and

crushed down his more generous impulses and beliefs, he might class her among the throng, if not of his enemies, at least of his accusers, of those who in thought, if not in action, had done him wrong. She wrung her hands together with sudden, sharp agony—how could she live feeling that he might be thus misjudging her?

As she sat with her book on her knee, forgetting to turn the pages, she went again and again wearily over the same ground, always returning to the same point; she had asked him to come, and he had not come—he had taken no notice of the request. As to that discovery which she had made when she had parted from him last, if she did not attempt to dispute or deny it, yet in some measure she put it out of sight. She knew that she loved him; she also knew, or thought she knew, that he did not love her. She had already laid it away amongst the certainties of life. As a possi-

bility, it would have troubled her ; as a probability, she might have struggled against it ; but being a certainty, she succeeded to some degree in putting it away. Nothing she could do would alter it, even if she would have had it altered—it was there, like death, certain, sure, and inevitable ; and, like death, it was ignored. It was a misfortune, perhaps ; but as one affecting herself alone, it ranked in importance below what concerned the man she loved. Had he been happy and successful and prosperous, she might have had leisure to be sorry for herself ; but as it was, the tragedy of his life left no room in her for minor considerations. She would have grudged him nothing ; it was the uselessness of the sacrifice alone, its powerlessness to help or heal him, which held for her any sting of bitterness.

Thus it was not of herself that she was thinking as she sat on alone after Miss Duke had left her, but of him ; dwelling with vain and

obstinate pertinacity upon the old painful story that she had gone over so often that it seemed to her that she knew it by heart; picturing to herself the hard and unsympathetic home of which he had once or twice incidentally given her the outline; dwelling upon the ordeal through which, alone and unfriended, his proud, sensitive nature had passed; and wondering, above all, as she had so often before vainly wondered, what had been the cause that had kept him silent—the reason that had held him back from a vindication.

His behaviour towards herself she did not resent. It was true he might have come, or at least have written; but could she blame him if he shrank from exposing himself again to insults such as that which in that very room—in her house—had been offered to him? No; she told herself, loyal even in thought, that if he had not done well, not chosen the best, at least he was not without a justification

in the course he was pursuing, the part he had taken ; he—— She broke off suddenly.

Even as the thought had passed through her mind the door had opened, and before she looked up she knew that the man of whom she had been thinking stood in the room.

The revulsion was too great. She did not rise or make any ordinary greeting ; and for his part, he too made none. He did not take her hand ; he scarcely so much as looked at her as he came forward. His face was worn and jaded, and his eyes had the restless look, the slight redness about the lids, which comes from want of sleep. After one glance at her, he turned abruptly away and sat down.

‘ I have come,’ he said, ‘ since you wished it—for the last time.’

Her heart seemed to stand still. She lifted her hand and passed it across her brow.

‘ For the last time ?’ she repeated mechanically.

‘For the last time.’ He was gazing gloomily before him, his lips compressed and his brow contracted, like a man who was nerving himself to undergo some severe physical suffering. There was a silence in the room. Just outside a bird was singing loudly. He turned to her abruptly.

‘I would have spared myself this,’ he said. ‘I have been three days making up my mind to face it, but it was a cowardly instinct.’

‘I do not understand,’ she answered. A vague, confused sense of pain and bewilderment, like a nightmare, oppressed her. ‘I do not understand. What would you have spared yourself?’

‘Seeing you again—telling you all you have a right to know—all my wretched story. But it is best that you should hear the truth from myself. It is at least due to you that you should know from my own lips that I——’

She lifted her hand with a swift movement of interruption, arresting the words he would have spoken.

‘Stop,’ she said. ‘Do not insult yourself or me by a justification. Do you imagine that I need it?—for what do you take me? Tell others, those who have doubted you, that you are innocent. I would sooner believe that I had done it myself.’

The rare passion was roused in her; her voice, low as it was, vibrated and rang; her blue eyes burnt; her face, even her lips, were bloodless.

Gilbert looked at her steadily for one long second; then, rising, walked across to the window, standing with his back to her and looking out. Perhaps a minute passed before he returned, his face a little harder, a little sterner than before. When he spoke his voice was steady and cold.

‘You are mistaken. I did it.’

The room swayed up and down around her. A ray of sunlight, which had found its way through the Venetian blinds and lay across it, flashed into her eyes, dazzling her; then for a moment all was dark. She put out her hand blindly as if to seek support or ward off a blow.

‘It is false,’ she said. ‘You say it to try me. You need not. I never doubted you.’

‘It is not false,’ he said roughly. ‘Is it a story a man would tell of himself if it were not true? Was it my fault that you did not believe it? did I ever lie to you? Did I not warn you again and again against myself? Nobody else doubted it—why should they? It had been clear as daylight from the first; I had never denied it. Did not they tell you of it before I even saw you? was it not the reason your sister threw me over? Did not my father’s friend insult me in this room?’

How was I to know that you alone doubted it? what more proof could you have had?

‘My God!’ she exclaimed.

She had scarcely heard what he had said, or at least had scarcely grasped the meaning of his words, but still the truth was forcing itself upon her, burning itself remorselessly into her brain. She had risen, and was standing leaning heavily upon a chair that stood near. Long afterwards the picture haunted him—her slight swaying figure, her dark head thrown back, and her eyes still with a stunned dreaming look in them, like some one who has received a blow and has but half recovered consciousness. She did not know what she was doing; her brain was in a horrible confused whirl. For a moment, when he had finished, she still stood motionless, and then sank once more upon her chair.

There was dead silence, unbroken by any word from Gilbert. He was leaning back,

staring straight before him. He was indistinctly aware that all was over, that he had done what he came to do, made confession of his guilt, and that nothing remained for him but to go. He had not come to plead, he had nothing to say in his defence; he had come but to do one thing, and he had done it. And that being accomplished he knew he would do best to leave her at once; that even his presence was in some way an insult to her. And yet how could he go with no farewell taken, no word of forgiveness spoken for the involuntary wrong he had done her—the unwilling falsehood? Never as friends would they meet again; he had learnt too deep a distrust of human nature to imagine that her friendship, founded as it had been upon false foundations—built upon a lie—would survive the overthrow of those foundations, and the shattering of her reckless baseless faith; but to part thus without a word—he could not do it!

And in the silence Eve was dumbly realizing the truth, and realizing it with anguish compared to which all she had hitherto suffered seemed as nothing. This then was the bar between them, of which she had so often been dimly, painfully conscious; it was this which had clouded his life, made men shun him, embittered his character; it was no false accusation as she had believed, no shameful injustice, but—a sin. He had sinned, she knew it from his own lips; from no other would she have believed it. As the first mist of incredulity gradually cleared away, the truth stood out—he *had* sinned. It was done; nothing could make it otherwise, no human love could save him from his past, or avail to remove the stain which lay, and would lie to the end, terrible and ineffaceable upon his life and name. She realized it, and with the realization came the darkest hour in Eve Carrington's life. To a pure soul the

shattering of faith in an ideal comes next in misery to the shattering of faith in a God ; reversing the text, it cries, 'Whereas I saw, now I am blind ;' and in its darkness it gropes at first in vain for light.

And yet with the very conviction of the irrevocable and irredeemable hopelessness of the case, there came a passionate pity for the man she loved. Every other misfortune might have been lived down, sorrow have been worn out, suffering dulled by time and use ; but a sin—a sin such as his had been—would cling to him through life, dogging his footsteps for ever.

It was scarcely five minutes that they sat there silent, but in that time her mind had so adjusted itself to the state of the case that it seemed as if she had known it for years. First had come the horror of the sin, the sharpness of disappointment, the keen personal sense of shame, as if she herself had been

guilty ; next the pity for the sinner ; and last of all, crushing and overwhelming, the realization of its consequences. For as she recovered from the first shock of bewildering pain, she recognised with cruel relentlessness the consequences of a sin which the world has agreed—unless the criminal has a sufficient bribe to offer—to hold unpardonable ; and even before her first horror and shame were past she had ranged herself with unhesitating, uncalculating devotion on the side of the man whom the world delighted to dishonour ; nay, far worse—whom it had reason and right on its side for dishonouring. She saw his life as it had been, and, alas ! as it would be to the end, and saw it with a miserable sense of her own utter helplessness to alter it ; saw the steady, cold, unforgetful justice of the world whose heel was on the neck of the man she loved ; and in that moment when she first knew and acknowledged, fully and despairingly, his guilt,

Eve Carrington's heart went out to him with a passionate surrender, such as in all her confidence of his innocence she had never felt. At last he spoke.

‘I must go. I have no right to be here. And yet, before we part, it will be better that you should hear the whole story. Not that I have any defence to make—there are no “extenuating circumstances”’—he gave a slight bitter smile. ‘I did the thing deliberately in cold blood, knowing what I was doing, and I was no boy. Still you may as well hear how it happened; it is the first time I have told the story to any living soul. Will you listen?’

She bowed her head, and he went on. It did not take long to tell—the truth seldom does in its simplicity—and he told it in plain unvarnished language, almost as if it had been the story of another, with no attempt at subterfuge or excuse. Perhaps there was

none to offer, perhaps he was too proud to advance what there might have been; more probably, in the light in which his past was just then bathed, the finer shades and degrees of guilt were lost. When he had done he paused for a moment, and then spoke again.

‘Have I convinced you?’ he asked, with a curious smile—‘you believe it now?’

Then at last she spoke, with a sob in her voice.

‘I would to God it had been I who had done it!’

It was the old unavailing longing to bear the burden of all—even of guilt—rather than see another weighed down under it.

“Would it were I had been false, not you!

I that am nothing, not you that are all”——’

But she had spoken under her breath, and he did not catch the words. He went on

‘And now, before I go, will you add to all that you have given me this—will you

forgive me—the man you honoured with your friendship, believing—God knows why—in his innocence, for having accepted it for a little while on false pretences, knowing himself all the time to be a criminal who, if he had had his deserts, would have been a *forçat*? God knows I never meant to deceive you, and when at last—it was that evening, you remember it, on the moor—when at last I guessed how it was, I could not tell you the truth. I knew it would be only for a little longer that we should be together, and there are temptations—of which you know nothing—which plead for pardon. When bread is offered to a starving man, is he bound to refuse it? You will forgive me—will you not—for not having told you at once that I was guilty?’

At last she found words and voice.

‘Guilty!’ she cried; ‘you are not guilty. It is not what men have done that makes

them innocent or guilty—it is what they are. Repentance is as pure and dearer in the sight of the angels of God than innocence itself.’

A proud, melancholy smile touched his lips.

‘It is this earth we have to do with now,’ he said; ‘and if you are right, then few of God’s angels walk it. And now good-bye. God helping me, I will never look upon your face or touch your hand again.’

A coldness as of death fell upon her. Once more his face had darkened to its habitual expression. He had again turned away, and was looking before him. A breeze had risen outside which rustled the leaves, and creeping into the room, lifted the heavy hair upon her forehead. Eve turned and looked at him. His face was hard and set, one of his hands lay clenched upon the arm of the chair. As she looked at him she forgot her compassion. It was not with his guilt or his inno-

cence that she was now concerned ; the past was as if it had never existed. Half an hour ago she had forgotten herself in the thought of him ; but now he was the man she loved, who was leaving her for ever, and her heart was breaking. If he had been happy she could have let him go—so she told herself. But now—and yet what could she do? for, alas, she knew that he did not love her!

‘God helping me, I will never touch your hand again,’ he had said.

With a sudden movement she put out her own and laid it upon his. The blood rushed to his face.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said, in a low, rough voice, not turning his head or looking at her ; ‘it is stained.’

The bird outside still sang loudly, deafeningly, filling up the pause.

In another moment she had bent, her head

and touched with her lips the hand where her own had lain—then, as he started up with a sharp exclamation, she was gone.

‘Eve,’ he cried; ‘Eve!’

He had already reached the door, but as his hand was on it he paused and turned back. He went to the chimney-piece and laid his head down on his arms. Perhaps five—ten minutes passed, and still he stood there motionless. When he lifted his face once more, he had fought his battle and won his victory.

He stood looking round at the familiar room, the dark walls, the books littered about, the flowers on the tables, the chair where he had found her sitting half an hour ago—taking leave of them all; and then he went, passing swiftly through the hall and out into the hot afternoon. He had striven as never before to see the right path, and seeing it, to walk in it, and, like so many others, he saw

in the most difficult that which honour pointed out.

Even now, little as he knew it, incredulously as he would have treated the suggestion, the opinion of the world was all-powerful with him. Once more he bowed to its verdict, said 'Amen' to its sentence, made himself his own executioner to carry out its decrees. Unconsciously, and at war with it as he had been, he had nevertheless adopted its methods of judging, its laxities and severities, even whilst he was in rebellion against them. It was not so strange as it seems. Perhaps we scarcely know how rarely it is that we most of us care to look at a sin itself, how almost invariably we view it in its manifold reflections. The world holds up its looking-glasses, magnifying or diminishing as the case may be, and we judge not only of others, but of ourselves, by the reflection rather than by the substance, and adopt, almost uncon-

sciously, its selfish and arbitrary scales and measures of guilt.

So it was with Gilbert Verschoyle. With him, all unaware of it as he was, the mirrors of the world had done their work ; it was in them that he viewed himself and his past, to them that he was sacrificing, not only his own future, but—as now he dimly guessed—that of the woman he loved. Whilst *her* eyes, purer and yet less inexorable than his, looked straight at the sin itself, and so looking were filled, even as we may imagine those of the angels, with an infinite pity as, through the sin and beyond it, they saw the sinner.





CHAPTER III.

IT was the day of Patricia's return. Two days had already passed since Eve had parted—as she knew, finally—from Gilbert Verschoyle.

Two days! It is not a long time, and yet much may be done in it; much built up, more cast down. In those forty-eight hours Eve had faced her position, and accepted it. The early discipline of sorrow through which she had passed had not been without its effects, deep and lasting, upon her character. She, as she was now, was the result and the consequence of a grief, and of a grief not fought against, but accepted, endured, and

conquered. Her sorrow for the loss of Harry Courtney had been, it is true, no more than the love of which it was the outcome and the end, of the same nature as this which had fallen upon her now ; it had been, compared to it, rather like that of a child, deep and real though it was, than that of a woman whose capacity for suffering has grown with her growth, and reached its full maturity and strength. It had been simple also, not complex ; unavoidable, and laid upon her—so to speak—by the hand of God and not by that of man. But the habit of submission, however learnt, is not easily nor lightly overthrown ; and though at first it had seemed to be shaken to its foundations, it had stood the test. Even in her first crushing despair there had been no taint or impulse of rebellion either against fate or against Gilbert, its human instrument. In natures like Eve's—above all else loyal—faith in the person loved stands only second to faith

in God; and notwithstanding the rude and cruel shock that faith had sustained, it had come out of the ordeal triumphant.

It had been no lie, no plausible attempt at a false consolation, but the simple and absolute truth which she had spoken when she told him that it was what he was, not what he had done, that constituted, in her eyes, his guilt or innocence; and trying him by that test—in ignorance perhaps, but at least in good faith—he stood, little as he would have anticipated it, obscurely as he guessed it now, unfallen still where she had placed him. In this at least, whatever else had befallen her, she was happy—that what might have shattered the fabric of her love, as it would certainly have been the bitterest drop in her cup—to have believed him to be unworthy of it, had been spared her. As to the rest, she faced, recognised, and accepted it.

He did not love her. In this alone she

was blind. It was impossible for her, single-minded as she was, as yet to believe that, had it not been so, he would have sacrificed them both to an illusion which in her eyes would have been but another form of homage to the world he had defied, taking the form of self-sacrifice, or to a mistaken sense of honour which would be but a subservience to the opinions of that judge which she, no less than he, had agreed to set at naught. Such a course of action was as yet incomprehensible to her; she did not understand that the first blind, upward step of the outlaw may be the recognition of laws which it is the duty of the citizen to resist, and, if necessary, to break; she had also to learn with what subtlety the wolf in his sheep's clothing escapes detection. He did not love her—that was a settled question; and, further, he had decided that their friendship must cease, that between them his position must stand as a barrier for ever. It

did not occur to her to question that decision. Her instinct told her, it is true, that he was wrong; she indistinctly felt that it was founded upon a misconception, and rested upon a false standard of right and an erroneous theory of life; that in his very search for the right path he had gone astray. But she did not blame him; and, moreover, she knew that against his decision there was no possibility of appeal, nor did she desire to make any.

The same trait in her character which made her gently self-reliant in forming and acting upon her own judgments, made her slow to seek to influence those of others. Even if she had not loved him, she would have acquiesced in his sentence, as she had been prepared to acquiesce before; and, loving him as she did now, consciously, absolutely, and devotedly, her very love bound her hands, and left her powerless to make another step, to speak

another word to bring him back. With a stillness which, if it bore the stamp of resignation, was not unallied to despair, she saw him go, knowing that the chapter of her life which his presence had filled was closed and done with for ever; and, whilst half stunned by the greatness of the blow, she bent her head under it with no thought of resistance.

Patricia had returned in good spirits. She was pleased with herself and with her prospects, and was disposed to be content with the world in general. She went so far, in her good-humour, as to bestow some unwonted caresses upon Kit, who, having been dressed by Marie for the occasion, and torn for the purpose from some favourite occupation, was indisposed to respond to them, and made no effort to conceal his *ennui*.

‘Are you going away again soon?’ he inquired, freeing himself as soon as possible,

with a bored attempt at making conversation ; whilst he gave an exhaustive survey to his mother's dress, which was new.

‘Do you want me to go?’ asked Patricia, more amused than hurt by the want of cordiality in her son's reception.

‘No, I don't care, unless Marie went too,’ replied Kit indifferently. ‘I can go now, can't I?’

‘What it is to have an affectionate son!’ observed Mrs. Ross, laughing, as he ran off. ‘That child has no more heart than——’ she broke off for want of a simile, and did not recur to the subject. She had, in fact, matters more interesting to discuss than the state of Kit's affections.

Her marriage was not to take place at once. Lord Ralston was by no means an impatient lover, and for reasons connected with business it had been settled that the wedding should be postponed till the beginning of the

new year, an arrangement with which Mrs. Ross had no fault to find.

‘It is just as well to have a little delay,’ she observed to her sister, discussing the subject with her usual frankness. ‘It is not as if we should see much of each other in the meantime—it is in those cases that a few months, more or less, may make a real difference. I think myself that people should never meet from the day they are engaged till they do at the altar—if they mean the affair to come off, that is, and are both of them above twenty. As it is, four months more of liberty, with one’s prospects assured, are, I do not deny it, pleasant. I never thought a sudden marriage desirable, any more than a sudden death. One wants some preparation for both.’

‘You put them in the same category?’ asked Eve listlessly.

‘In a way. All the great events of life bear a certain resemblance to one another.

Marriage, however'—with a laugh—'has the advantage over birth and death, that it admits of a rehearsal, which neither of the others do—a *dress* rehearsal, too! I remember all that happened when I married Robert, and I hope to be able to avoid some of my mistakes.'

'Do you think one ever does?' asked Eve absently. The two were alone in the drawing-room after dinner, Miss Duke having discreetly withdrawn.

'Does what?' asked Mrs. Ross. 'Avoid one's old mistakes? I hope so, I am sure,' with a laugh. 'For example, I shall not go to the same dressmaker again—if there is to be a mistake about the matter it shall, at least, be a different one. Oh, I think we can set some of our past errors right.'

'Were they ours?' said Eve, rather dreamily. 'How far back do we reach? what is ourselves?' Her thoughts had wandered from her sister's light talk to the changes that

life works, the transformations it effects, not outside but within us.

The past seemed to her just then like a spiritual *morgue*, where our dead selves lie side by side in ghastly rows. Which, she wondered, should we claim—have we a right to any, and if to any, to which? or is it best to shut the door and creep away, leaving the poor corpses unowned and alone? And yet—the words recurred to her with a shudder—‘I believe in the Resurrection of the dead:’ all those corpses will rise to confront us.

‘What *is* ourselves?’ she had said. She was thinking of that past which now seemed so remote, so dead and cold, side by side with the present in all its vividness and reality, filled with one single idea which blotted out all the rest. Was it herself, she wondered confusedly, that figure that stood among the dead years, calm and serene, tranquil alike in its love and its regret, equally removed from

the touch of passion or the anguish of despair, which had become visitors so familiar to her of late. The long strain of the last ten days was telling upon her; her brain felt bewildered and confused, but Patricia's voice recalled her to herself.

‘Are you well, Eve?’ she asked, rather uneasily. ‘You have not been ill without letting me know?’

Now that she was at leisure to observe her sister, she thought the girl changed, though she scarcely knew how to define the alteration. She had always been quiet, but had she been quite so listless, so still before? Had not her eyes a new expression under their heavy lids. An unwelcome suspicion occurred to her, as she suddenly recalled the passage in Eve's letter, which had disquieted her by its reference to Mr. Verschoyle. She did not, however, at once mention his name.

‘Have you been well?’ she repeated, bending forward to take a closer survey of the girl’s face.

‘Quite well, thank you,’ answered Eve, completely recalled to the present, and turning to take up her work with a sort of impatience. It was a few minutes before Mrs. Ross spoke again.

‘By the way,’ she said carelessly, though she kept her eyes upon her sister as she asked the question, ‘you mentioned Mr. Verschoye in one of your letters. Did he call?’

‘Yes,’ said Eve. She went on steadily with her work, but she made a wrong stitch.

‘Ah, he did? It was ill-judged of him. I should not have thought—though, as you know,’ laughing lightly, ‘my opinion of him is not high—that he would have been the man to presume upon such an introduction as his to force his acquaintance upon you.’

Eve had lifted her eyes and looked at her

sister. Not a trace of colour had come into her face.

‘He did not come uninvited,’ she said. ‘I asked him.’

Something in her manner, quiet though it was, arrested the exclamation which had risen to Patricia’s lips, and forbade her to put any more questions or to express the disapprobation she felt. She was troubled and baffled. That there had been something peculiar, something more than a common casual acquaintanceship in the relations of Eve with her own former lover, Mrs. Ross was certain, whether guided to her conclusion by instinct or by something in the girl’s face, but as to what it had been she felt completely and wholly at a loss. To whatever the change in her sister was due, of one thing she felt sure—that it was not happiness which had worked it; and yet if they loved each other, what stood between them? After a short pause, curiosity

getting the better of discretion, she spoke again.

‘And now that—against my advice, remember—you have prosecuted your acquaintance with Mr. Gilbert Verschoyle, do your former rather rash conclusions still hold good? Do you still persist in believing him, in the face of the rest of the world, to be innocent, or have you come round to my views?’

She spoke with something not unlike a sneer in her voice, gay though it was; but, looking at Eve, she regretted her words. A change had flashed over her face, not the less significant because the features remained at rest, and the colour scarcely wavered. It was a change intangible, not to be described in words, but yet startling even to Patricia’s careless gaze. A new gleam lit the blue eyes, a new ring was in her voice as she answered.

‘Come round to your views!’ she repeated.
‘God grant I may never do that!’

She stopped short. It was not for want of words. For once, scorn and contempt had risen up and mastered her. A strange unaccustomed wave of anger, of indignation and sorrow, swept over her heart. Not only did she see in Patricia the woman who had thrown Gilbert over, who had lied to him and deceived him, but she stood also before her as the incarnation of the world who was his foe, who had degraded and scorned him; and with all the gathered force of repression and silence the torrent was sweeping her away, urging her, if not to his vindication—since that, alas, was impossible—at least to avenge him, to lay bare to Patricia the littleness, the inconceivable inferiority of herself to Gilbert, the man she had dared to insult, whom she had weighed in her balances and found wanting.

Yet even at that moment came a change; as the words were on her lips ready to be poured out, they died there, whilst shame, keen and

sudden, laid hold of her. Was it possible that she who should have known better, she who loved Gilbert Verschoyle, should so have forgotten herself—nay, forgotten him—as to have been on the point of being betrayed into making his defence, should have fallen so low as to have been ready to reproach this shallow worldly woman on his behalf? Was it for her to break the silence he had chosen to keep? In that moment she felt so absolutely one with him, so stained by his guilt, so much a sharer in his disgrace, that she poured contempt upon herself for the impulse to which she had so nearly yielded, as if it had been a personal wrong that she had been prompt to resent, a personal insult that she had been ready to avenge. Pride, of which on her own behalf her gentle and noble nature knew so little, woke within her for the man she loved; and for his sake she was silent, triumphing over her swift indignation, and crushing back the expression it would have found.

As Patricia gazed at her in astonishment, her face changed. When she spoke again she was calm and collected as ever, and her tones not much colder.

‘Lady Courtney is coming back to Mace to-morrow,’ she said, as if no word of Gilbert Verschoyle had been spoken, and she was taking up the conversation where it had been left off. ‘Cyril called this morning to tell me, and to ask us to go and see her next week.’

Patricia accepted with alacrity the change of subject, and alluded no more to Gilbert Verschoyle; though not the less did she intend to prosecute her investigations on the subject when opportunity offered. For the present, however, she had to own herself defeated, and Miss Duke, whom, with some caution, she interrogated, did not throw much light on the subject. With more astuteness than would have been expected of her, but which is some-

times to be found in the most simple of women, she reflected that if, as Eve had told her, Mr. Verschoyle was coming no more, it was not necessary that Mrs. Ross should know how frequent his visits had been, and that at least it would be well that the girl should make her own communications to her sister with regard to them. She therefore, whilst answering Patricia's questions with the most transparent openness, and a candour which defied suspicion, managed to convey little to Mrs. Ross's mind beyond the fact, of which she was already in possession, that Mr. Verschoyle had been an occasional visitor at Nortons in her absence. It fortunately did not occur to Patricia to make inquiries of her son, from whom she would probably have gained as much information as, for the purposes of pursuing her investigations, she at present required.



CHAPTER IV.

‘**A**ND how do you expect Nortons to get on without you, for four months?’

Cyril Courtney asked the question as he drove Eve home one afternoon when, some weeks later, she had been spending the day with his mother. It had, as his words implied, been arranged that the girl was to leave home for a time; she had, in fact, agreed to accompany her sister abroad for the months that were to elapse before the marriage of the latter took place. Patricia, who, not unnaturally, had begun to find country life somewhat dull, had suggested the plan, and Eve,

more or less to her surprise, had accepted it without raising any objections.

‘ You want a change,’ Mrs. Ross had said. ‘ You are looking much too pale. Come to Nice with me and get back the colour into your face ;’ and Eve had yielded without a demur—perhaps she too thought that she wanted a change.

Patricia was relieved at her sister’s acquiescence, but she was at the same time confirmed in her suspicions that something had occurred which made the girl willing and ready to leave the neighbourhood, for she had never found her very accessible to persuasion on the subject before. Cyril had been less submissive. In his consternation at the intelligence which Mrs. Ross had first imparted to him, he had, indeed, been more communicative than in a cooler moment he might have been prepared to be ; and it was mainly owing to the influence she had brought to bear that

he had not endeavoured at least to obtain a distinct pledge from the girl before letting her go. But to this Mrs. Ross was eagerly opposed. With her suspicions aroused, though still vague and unformed, she did her best to convince him that the present occasion was not a propitious one to try his fortunes.

‘I wish you well, believe me,’ she said, with more earnestness than was customary to her, with regard to affairs in which she was not herself directly concerned; ‘and it is because I do that I say let her alone for a time. Why should you be so impatient?’

‘I don’t think that is a fair charge,’ said Courtney. ‘As men go, I think I cannot be accused of impatience. But there is a limit to everything.’

‘At any rate, leave things alone just for the present. She is not in good spirits just now—she is nervous, I think, and depressed,’ rather impatiently. ‘Surely you can see that

for yourself. I am advising you for your own good.'

'Do you mind my shutting the window?' said Courtney, crossing the room as he spoke—the interview was taking place in the drawing-room at Nortons—'the wind is cold to-day. Now,' coming back and looking at her keenly, 'will you be good enough to tell me whether you mean anything special by your warnings? It would seem at first sight that your sister being nervous and depressed scarcely furnishes a sufficient reason for my deferring asking her to marry me. Do you know anything that you are keeping from me?'

For a moment Patricia hesitated. What would be the result should she communicate her fears to the young man? Would it do good or harm? She decided, however, almost at once on silence. If Eve were to be coerced she knew her well enough to be sure

that it would not be by open opposition, but by diplomacy; and in his present mood of irritation she felt that Sir Cyril was not to be trusted.

‘I know nothing,’ she said. ‘What should I know? Yet I think you would do best to be guided by me.’

Sir Cyril had yielded, but he had not felt satisfied or at ease. He had not been without his own misgivings since his return to Mace. He, no less than Patricia, had been conscious of a certain change in Eve, slight, intangible and indefinite, but which still made itself distinctly felt. It was the barrier set up between them, though he did not know it, of an experience which was colouring all her life and its horizons, of which he knew nothing and, more, with which it would have been impossible to him to sympathize. Such barriers it is that divide friends whom no injuries nor angers nor resentments could

part. Of its existence Courtney was dimly, impatiently aware, although absolutely ignorant of its cause.

This afternoon, as he drove her home and did his best to talk in his usual way upon indifferent subjects, he was watching carefully, though covertly, for any indication which might lend him a key to the mystery.

‘How do I expect Nortons to get on without me?’ she answered, repeating his question with a faint smile. ‘I think we are all apt to overrate the difference our presence or our absence makes in the world. It is so big and we are so little.’ She was talking somewhat at random, and Cyril laughed.

‘I don’t think our relative sizes have much to do with the question,’ he said. ‘Besides, the world, our world, is not big. We are forever knocking our heads against its walls or brushing up against unwelcome acquaintances; and besides, it is always getting smaller. Ah,’

breaking off and shivering, as, turning a corner, they were met by a blast of wind, 'I wish we had brought the brougham.' He wrapped her shawl closer round her with his disengaged hand. 'Are you not cold?'

'No,' she said.

She was looking before her, her face as white and still as if it had been cut in stone. He glanced at her with a thrill of passionate irritation. He knew that, close to his side as she was, he was as remote from her as if miles lay between them — she was scarcely even conscious of his presence. He felt for a moment a wild desire to rouse her, no matter how. In his present mood he could have better borne that she should be angry with him than thus absolutely, gently indifferent. Another moment, however, and he had mastered himself.

'What were we talking about?' he said.

The smallness of the world, was it not? It

is perfectly true; there is no room for a poor fellow to lose himself in it now, even if he has the best reasons for wishing to do so. You can never feel sure you have seen the last of anybody.'

'Can't you?' Eve looked at him with absent eyes, as he paused for an answer.

'Never. I met a man the other day who told me it had been his chief object for years to lose sight of his family—they were such an unpleasant lot—and he never could manage it. At last he went out in desperation to Colorado, and the very first year he was there he had to go and sit upon an inquest or jury, or something of the kind—some inquiry that was being held to make out whether a man had been properly murdered or not—that is all they look at there; it seems there is a proper and improper way of sticking a knife into you—and he found the victim was a cousin of his own. He said it was such a shock to his

nerves—the idea, I mean, that he might have met him walking about alive only a day or two before—that he really couldn't be hard upon the fellow who had put him out of the way, however he had done it. I believe he got him off scot-free, and pensioned him for life. After that he said he made up his mind it was no use fighting against fate, so he gave it up as a bad job, and came home. He has turned quite a domestic character now. I met him last month at Harry Rate's, and I really shouldn't have known him again. He has got a wife, and a baby which he takes out in its perambulator.'

'You stayed with the Rates a month, did not you?' said Eve. She had been only half listening, but felt the necessity of saying something as he stopped.

'More than a month—yes. Rate is married too, you know. All my contemporaries are settling down in life. He seems to like his

wife. *I* shouldn't. I told him so ; but it annoyed him, so I didn't repeat it. She looks about fourteen. I always had to remember not to tell her she had forgotten to put on her pinafore. She makes up, however, for her youthful appearance by assuming the airs of a well-worn woman of the world—a female Rochefoucauld in fact—and deals in cynical remarks about virtue. If I were Rate I should box her ears, but he doesn't seem to mind. And so '—after a pause, and with a complete change of manner—'you are really going next week.'

Eve looked up with a curious startled expression.

'Next week?' she repeated. 'Is it next week?'

'You should know best. I thought so,' he said. His nerves were strained, and he spoke with a jar in his voice, as if it was an effort to keep his temper. 'Is not the nineteenth the day you were to start?'

‘I did not remember—that it was so soon.’ She gave a short shivering sigh. Was it indeed so? Were there only five more days before she was to leave Nortons—to leave England? Five more days, and then her last chance of seeing Gilbert again would be over. She had once more forgotten Cyril; but he was observing her closely, all his suspicions confirmed by her manner, though as to what it pointed he was as much in the dark as ever.

‘Is anything the matter, Eve?’ he said rather sharply. ‘If, after all, you do not wish to leave home, there can be no reason why you should go.’

She looked round at him, her eyes darkened by a look he had never seen there before.

‘I must go,’ she said.

Again he felt that the look and the words pointed to something below the surface, of which he did not hold the key. With an

effort he regained his self-control, and spoke more gently.

‘Is it that something has gone wrong?’ he asked ; ‘and if so, will you not trust me?’

For a moment Eve wavered. Should she indeed tell him, Cyril, her dearest friend, her only close friend, the truth? For once the temptation to shift the burden which, borne alone, was so intolerably heavy, on to the shoulders of another—to be free at least from the weight of solitude which oppressed her, was strong; she had almost opened her lips to speak, when there flashed across her memory the words which he had used concerning Verschoyle, on the only occasion on which his name had been mentioned between them, and that recollection sealed her lips. Yet he was waiting for an answer, and something must be said.

‘Oh, Cyril!’ she cried, under her breath. ‘Life is difficult, and it is hard to see the way.’

‘Have *you* found that out?’ he asked. ‘I thought life was a simple matter to you. And you will not let me help you?’

‘You could not help me. There are troubles which must be faced—like death—alone.’

He drew his breath quickly.

‘And you are facing this one—alone?’

She understood the meaning which underlay his question, and flushed deeply.

‘Alone,’ she answered.

They drove on in silence, never broken till they reached Nortons; and he drew up at the door, and helped her down.

‘Here you are at last!’ said Patricia, as, a minute later, the two entered the drawing-room together. ‘General Cartwright has been waiting to wish you good-bye.’

The visitor had risen and come forward. For a scarcely perceptible space of time, Eve paused upon the threshold, a curious ex-

pression flashing across her face; then, advancing, she touched the old man's proffered hand. No one had noticed the momentary hesitation.

'I am sorry he should have waited,' she said, replying in her low, even tones to her sister.

'Oh, I could not let you leave the country without making you Mrs. Cartwright's farewells and my own,' said the General, with somewhat ponderous cordiality, quite unconscious of the double meaning underlying her words, and only thinking—as, for that matter, he had thought before—how cold the girl's manner was. 'Your sister encouraged me to hope you would be back before long, even though'—with a laughing glance at Courtney from his shrewd old eyes—'it was from Mace that you were expected. And we are really to lose you for the rest of the year? How people run about in these days!

It is really the exception when they stop at home. My wife keeps *me* safely there, poor thing !' added the General, with a sigh, partly due to his wife's illness, partly perhaps to its results.

'Is she better ?' asked Eve.

She had sat down and drawn off her gloves, and was proceeding to pour out the tea, which had just been brought in. Cyril, watching her, was surprised at the hard look her face had taken—again it was one which he did not recognise. She had never looked towards the General since she had first come in.

'Better ? Well, when was it I saw you last ? She has so many ups and downs, poor soul ! Ah ! about a month ago, was it not ?'

'About a month ago,' assented Eve mechanically.

She had been lifting a cup, but her hand

shook, and she put it down again upon the table.

‘I remember now,’ went on the General garrulously. ‘Yes ; it was the day you had young Verschoyle here on business. I hope, by the way, you are not going to let him have that bit of land which lies near his gates? I always distrust ladies in business matters ; and his father was for ever at poor Carrington to get it into his hands, and never succeeded. It made quite a coolness between them at one time ; but though Verschoyle was a friend of my own, I confess I was not sorry he was beaten. He was too fond of getting everything his own way. Your uncle stuck to it, at all events. I remember hearing him say that he had never parted with an acre in his life.’

Cyril had turned to answer some observations of Mrs. Ross’s ; but, catching the drift of the General’s discourse, he glanced at Eve

with some vague suspicion for which he could not have accounted. The girl's head was, however, bent over the tray, and her voice betrayed nothing unusual.

‘No; he told me he had never sold any land since he came into possession of Nortons,’ she answered quietly. ‘Will you have some tea?’

‘Thank you,’ taking it absently from her hand. ‘By the way, Courtney, did you see Verschoye on Friday at the meet?’

‘Yes,’ said Cyril, rather curtly.

‘He is his father's son after all,’ went on the old man, chuckling. ‘Little Hicks Dempster, the fellow who has just bought old Milward's place, came up to him—evidently meant to be kind, you know, and set an example to the neighbourhood, which has not received Dempster himself over-cordially—like his insolence, a little wretch who sleeps all day and drinks all night. I was standing

a few yards off, and saw it all. Verschoyle was perfectly civil, but he sent Dempster about his business as if it had been he who had been the forger instead of the other. I was never more amused in my life. I am sure I don't approve of Verschoyle myself, but it served the little wretch right for trying to patronize a man who is a gentleman, if he is nothing else.'

Cyril scarcely answered. He had been watching Eye intently. A moment later he rose.

'I must go,' he said, with an odd tone in his voice; 'it is growing late. Good-bye.'

He shook hands as he spoke, and left the room. He never remembered how he quitted the house. He did not know that he stumbled over Kit, who, as usual, was crouched on the floor in the hall playing marbles, and who rose, rubbing his shoulder and looking after him, muttering a word presumably learnt

from Joe, the stable-boy. The dogcart was standing at the door, and he got into it, taking the reins from the man who was holding the horse, and drove off, all like a man in a dream, oppressed by some strange, incomprehensible nightmare. Surely it must be a delusion—it could not be true—and yet how the knowledge had come to him he knew not; but this he knew, with a certainty for the time as complete and crushing as if her lips had spoken it, that, impossible as it seemed, however and through whatever disastrous chain of circumstances it had come about, Eve Carrington loved Verschoye; Eve, whom his dead brother should have married, whom he himself had for years loved in vain, Eve loved a man dishonoured and disgraced—a man with a stained name and a ruined character. For a time he was almost stunned by the unexpectedness of the blow. At last he roused himself.

‘I will not give her up,’ he said to himself, between his closed teeth. ‘Love Verschoyle or not, she is not engaged to him, and I will not give her up.’





CHAPTER V.

‘**W**HY, Eve, you are not going to church?’ asked Patricia, looking up with a shiver from her arm-chair over the fire, as her sister entered the drawing-room ready dressed. It was Sunday afternoon, and the day before they were to leave Nortons.

Although October was scarcely half over, winter was come upon them. A bitter black frost had set in for the last few days, making Mrs. Ross rejoice openly in the prospect of quitting Nortons and seeking a more genial climate.

‘Yes,’ said the girl. She took up a plaid

lying upon the sofa, and went out, whilst Mrs. Ross returned with a shrug of her shoulders to her novel.

‘She will kill herself one of these days,’ she said, contemplating the prospect, however, with sufficient equanimity. ‘I wonder what is the matter with her. I never saw a girl look so ill, and yet she is never quiet.’

It was true. Foreign as was restlessness to Eve’s nature, it was as if a new spirit had taken possession of her of late. She had wandered about the autumn woods early and late, climbing the moor, and returning after dark drenched and dripping ; taking long walks and longer rides. Only in one direction her steps were never turned. Except when it was necessary she should visit Mace she never went in the direction of Verschoyle’s home ; never went where it was possible she might meet him.

To-day she was going to Thornton Church,

lying about a mile and a half off, across meadows, and through a pine-wood. It had long been Eve's frequent custom to resort there on Sunday afternoons ; and to-day—her last day—she could not stay at home. She felt her courage failing, ebbing away from her. Once gone, it would be better ; so she told herself with feverish asseveration. She would at least have left behind her the associations of the summer, which were ever rising to vex her with their vain and tormenting importunity ; once away, surely she would begin to forget. Here, how could she help remembering, when the hour came round that had been used so often to bring him ? The very rooms, the moorland, the woods, the garden, were all haunted by his shadowy presence. She was impatient to be gone. If only the wrench were over—if only, too, it could be for ever—and she need never return to take up the same old life again. So she thought

as she walked through the sharp biting air.

Thornton Church was one of the few which the tide of modern innovation had not as yet reached. Old, grey, and time-worn, it stood nestled among the surrounding hills, still safe, without and within, from the hand of either the restorer or reformer, with the ivy clambering unchecked over its walls, and the grass growing rank and green among the moss-grown tombstones below. Within, too, all was tranquil and slumberous. Here, on Sundays, the rector, a fragile old man with a serene, not unspiritual face, read the prayers slowly and monotonously, as he had read them for the last thirty years ; here the same old hymns were chanted, inharmoniously enough ; and here, Sunday after Sunday, he ascended the pulpit to preach, in his black gown, one of the time-honoured discourses with which the least attentive of his hearers were familiar,

whilst they listened sleepily or slumbered below.

To-day the grey old church was darker than its wont ; less light than usual made its way through the narrow, deep windows. Eve sat in a seat alone—there was no inconvenient crowding at Thornton Church—her hands clasped on her knee, her eyes vacantly fixed on the opposite tablet, which recorded where and when Martha, the beloved wife of James Mallison, had entered into rest. ‘There remaineth therefore a rest’ — the words caught her eye, and entered dreamily into her senses. What rest ? She, too, was tired, very tired.

She did not hear much of the sermon ; perhaps she had not heard much more of the prayers. When the service was over, and she came out, one of the last of the small congregation, a small fine snow was falling from the leaden clouds overhead. One or two of

the poor people who knew the girl by sight, glanced at her, surprised at her presence in such weather, so far from home ; but she did not notice them, as she turned down the lane that led away from the village towards Nortons. The light was fading quickly, and she knew she must make haste if she would reach home before dark. She walked rapidly on till she had reached a small wicket-gate which led to a short cut through the fir-woods ; but, as she turned towards it, she started and stood still with a quick gasping breath, for, leaning on the gate, as if waiting, his colley lying at his feet, was Gilbert Verschoyle.

For a moment neither spoke, as, with clasped hands, they stood silently facing one another. It was he who broke the silence.

‘I came to meet you. I remembered you sometimes came this way. I came to say good-bye.’

‘Yes,’ she said.

She had withdrawn her hand and passed into the wood, and, turning, he was slowly walking by her side.

‘I could not help coming,’ he said, as if excusing himself to some unseen monitor. ‘It was not possible that we should part so. I heard you were leaving home, and when you return I shall be gone.’

‘You are going?’

She scarcely spoke above her breath.

‘Yes, I am going. If it is cowardly I confess it—I own myself beaten; but I could not have lived here. I must find a new life—since one must live. Did you not once say that there are always possibilities in life? It may be true; at any rate I will try to find them—one can but fail.’

‘What is failure?’ she said dreamily.

‘Ah, that is the question!’ he was speaking rapidly, perhaps to hide the unsteadiness of

his voice. 'Before I met you I thought I knew—I would have sworn I could have given as good a definition of it as most men; but now I am not so sure which way it lies. At any rate I am going to try. You will wish me good luck—in the name of the Lord?'

She smiled, a curious mechanical smile, but she did not answer—perhaps she had not heard.

'You are leaving Sandmoor?' she asked, lifting her hand for a moment to her brow as if bewildered.

'Yes, and for always. No half-measures would do. I do not know yet where I shall go—perhaps to the Colonies; but at all events I shall never return there.'

She was silent. She could not have spoken. Till then she had not known what her hopes had been, that she had hoped at all. But now that they were to part for ever, that the sentence was, as it were, irrevocably passed, a

sort of physical numbness crept over her, confusing her senses. A thick veil hid her face. The snow in tiny hard balls fell upon her dark dress, and pattered almost like hail among some hollies that skirted the path. After a pause he went on, striving for his ordinary tone.

‘So, as we are to part, I laid wait for you, that we might have one more walk together—our last. There were one or two things I had to say—requests to make ; it sounds like a death-bed, does it not?’ with an unmirthful laugh. ‘You will hear them, will you not, and remember that the dying—parting, after all, has an element of death in it—claim a right to ask what the living may not.’

She bowed her head, never speaking. A little breeze got up and crept down the path. She shivered as it met her.

‘You are cold,’ he said, bending to wrap the heavy plaid, which had got loosened, more

closely around her. ‘How could they let you come so far? Yet I will not quarrel with them since it has given us our meeting. How silent you are to-day! I have scarcely heard your voice.’ He stopped, and then went on quickly. ‘To come to what I had to ask. Will you—do you mind giving me, now that I am going away, a parting gift—something of yours to help me to remember you?’ He was still speaking in the same half-jesting tone.

She paused a moment, standing still in the path; then suddenly drawing off her glove she took the ring—Harry Courtney’s—which still shone on her left hand. To both of them had come the memory of their last sunny hour when, half in earnest, he had asked her whether, at his request, she would discard the symbol of her former love. She had hesitated then; but now, unasked, she drew off the ring and held it out to him.

‘What—that?’ he said, moved, almost startled, though reading her action but in part. Only dimly he guessed that she was sacrificing to him, recklessly and for no return, not the present alone, but the sacred peaceful memories of the past. Through him she knew that she had never loved Harry Courtney. For a moment he did not take it. ‘I did not mean that—now. I only meant a flower, a ribbon, anything. Are you sure that if I take that, you will never be sorry that you gave it?’

‘I shall never wear it again,’ she said, laying it in his hand.

He turned abruptly away. He was cursing himself—telling himself that he had been a fool, a madman—worse—to come, to seek this interview. His strength was ebbing away with every minute that passed—his face was white and set, his breath came hard.

‘I had no right to come,’ he said hoarsely.

‘Eve, why do you not reproach me? why do you not tell me I had no right to seek you? Yet there are things too hard to require of a man. I could not let you go without seeing you once more. When we parted—when you left me that day,’ his voice was husky and broken, ‘I swore—you remember it, Eve—that I would never look upon your face again, God helping me. He has *not* helped me. I have tried to keep that vow, and I have failed. I have kept it for three weeks, to break it at last. I am glad that it is broken; it was an impossible vow. I must have seen you once again, if it was only to tell you that before I knew you I had lost my faith in man’s charity and God’s forgiveness, and that you have given them both back to me. Bad though I may be, I am a better man for having known you. If after all, late as it is, I save something out of the wreck, it will be to you that I owe it.’

She looked up, an illuminating gleam flashing over the pallor of her face.

‘ Then I have not lived in vain. Whatever my life may be, I thank God for it.’

The words fell from her lips but half-consciously ; she was speaking to herself rather than to him. She was still wrapped in a mist of bewildered pain. She did not understand. That he was leaving her she knew ; he had told her so again and again, asking nothing from her but a remembrance, a parting gift. And yet what was the meaning of his hurrying broken words, of his face, and of the eyes which even now sought hers ? She was in a thick cloud through which one fact alone penetrated with clear, cruel distinctness—that he was leaving her—that this was their farewell. Yet, now, as his words reached her, telling of what she had done, what she had been to him, for one brief moment a ray of pure selfless gladness pierced the gloom.

Whatever might betide, whatever suffering she might yet undergo, this much was certain, that since his words were true, since it was thus with him, she had not lived in vain. Perhaps never had her self-annihilation, her self-erasure reached a point so absolute and complete as at this moment when, because her life had been of service to him she felt that it had not been wasted, and for that reason alone—not because of joy that had been 'or might be hers—she thanked God that she had been born. He went on.

‘And now tell me something in return. Tell me if it is possible—and I know you cannot lie—tell me that my prophecy has not been fulfilled, that now that we are parting, now that we shall never meet again, you do not reproach me, even in your heart, for having taken you at your word, and accepted your friendship?’

His voice was urgent ; his eyes, compelling

an answer, were fixed on her. A pale smile parted her lips.

‘That was a promise,’ she said. ‘I have kept it.’

Again silence fell upon them. They were nearing the end of the woods ; a few minutes more and they would gain the field that divided them from the high-road. As they reached the gate which opened into the meadow, he stopped.

‘Then here we part,’ he said.

She, too, stood still, leaning heavily against the gate; but she made no answer. He spoke again.

‘Lift up your veil,’ he said ; ‘let me see you once more.’

Silently she obeyed. What did it matter what he might read in her face—what did anything matter ? Pale and mute she stood before him, and he looked at her long and steadily, as if he would engrave her face on

his memory, line by line, trait by trait. It had changed since first it had opened a new world to him ; his heart contracted as he noted the stains under the beautiful eyes, the droop of the patient mouth, the intangible, subtle seal that suffering had set upon the brow, the weary languor of the slight figure.

‘ You are tired,’ he said unsteadily, looking down at her with a great yearning at his heart, yet not touching so much as the hands which hung clasped together before her.

She looked up with a long gasping breath.

‘ So tired,’ she answered, ‘ that I would willingly lie down and sleep for ever.’

He turned sharply away. His love at last was getting the better of him, breaking down his defences ; but again he was wrestling with it, striving to crush it down. He leant on the gate, staring straight before him, the snow driving in his face. All was profoundly still, except when now and then a branch cracked

overhead, or a squirrel sprang from tree to tree. He knew now, as he had known before—deny it to himself as he might—that she loved him, and knowing it, he was saying to himself at last that to part with her thus—with only the assurances of broken words, of half-understood looks, between them—this was what no law, human or divine, should compel him to do ; nay, more, he was recognising at length, slowly and indistinctly still, and as if by flashes, that the law to which he had been ready to sacrifice her no less than himself, that, namely, of the world's so-called honour, had been a false and lying one, dressed up in the garb of truth. Whatever might be his past, his guilt in the sight of God, his dishonour in the eyes of men, she loved him, and by virtue of that love it was to another master than the world, a higher law than that to which it bowed, that they should fall or stand. Yet none the less was

the struggle sharp, the victory uncertain ; pride in the disguise of honour was making its last obstinate stand.

He turned and looked at her. She was standing, her hands clasped together like a child at its prayers, her eyes lifted to his face with a dumb appeal, which now as ever was to him, not against him, and full even now of an unquestioning faith. That look decided him.

‘Eve,’ he said, ‘you love me.’ It was not so much a question as the simple, grave statement of a fact.

‘Yes,’ she answered; nothing more.

He gave her a long look ; then he sighed.

‘Come, then,’ he said.

The snow fell thicker and thicker, the bitter wind blew unheeded in their faces, as he bent and kissed her.

‘And you would have left me—because of that?’ she asked him a few minutes later. She

knew all now—the meaning of the struggle, the cost of the victory—but yet she could scarcely understand it ; so dim and strange was it to her comprehension that what weighed so little with her in the balances should have been so nearly all-powerful with him. ‘ You would have left me—for that ? ’ It was scarcely reproach that was in her voice, rather a sort of wondering surprise.

‘ Does it seem to you so little ? ’ he said. ‘ Ah, Eve, do you know what you are doing ? What had you done to life that it should have thrown me in your path ? No,’—as she would have interrupted him—‘ no, you must hear me out this once. What had you done to life, you white soul, that it should have thrown me in your path—a man who not only bears a stained name, but who has the brand of his disgrace stamped on his life and character ? Listen to me, Eve: it was not only because of the world’s condemnation and the

world's sentence that I would not have won you. That was enough, but there is worse behind—it was because of what it had made me. Eve, surely you know it—something of it, at least. One virtue, at least, I may claim; I was never a hypocrite. First the sin, then the punishment—they have both left their brand upon me, and it will never be removed. When I look back at myself—I have sometimes done so of late—as I was that morning, the day I did it—it was the twenty-fifth of May, and the lilacs and laburnums were out in the Oxford gardens—and then as I am now, I wonder that I ever dared to touch your hand; I wonder I dare to dream now of calling you my wife. I never knew what I had done, never realized what it had made me, till I knew you loved me, and that I had nothing left to offer you but a stained name and a ruined life. Eve,' he went on bitterly, as if in spite of himself, 'my father did his

best to ruin me, body and soul, and but for you he would have succeeded. If I had been given only one more chance, if——’ he broke off. ‘After all, it is a poor thing to lay the blame of one’s failings on other people,’ he said, regaining his self-command, and with it his ordinary manner—‘it is an error I have not been guilty of before ; but still, you do not know, you cannot guess, how inconceivably hard, how almost impossible it is not to fall to what men believe you—what you have given them the right to believe you to be.’ He paused ; when he spoke again his voice had once more changed. ‘There, will you go?’ he said softly. ‘I have warned you—will you not be wise and go?’

She only pressed the closer. A smile that was at once tender and sad displaced for a moment the hard lines round his mouth.

‘No?’ he said ; he put his arm round her and drew her close ; ‘then have your way.

Yet bear me witness that I have warned you.'

'You have finished?' she asked. She had lifted her head; a soft triumph lit her wet blue eyes and rang in her voice. 'I have heard you out, and now listen to me—let me speak now. I would rather bear your name stained than any other spotless. I would be prouder to share your life, ruined and disgraced as you tell me it is, than any other man's living. "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God."'

He attempted no further remonstrance. She had conquered. There was a long silence. At last he spoke, with a certain urgency in his voice.

'Eve,' he said, 'I know that you love me. Can you tell me that you trust me, too?'

She looked up at him for a moment in silence, then, lifting her face, she kissed his lips.

‘After God, you,’ she said.

Half an hour later they were walking slowly back towards Nortons. It was late and dark, and Mrs. Ross at home was looking at the uninviting atmosphere outside, and wondering, though still with the freedom from undue anxiety which characterized her, what could have happened to her sister.

‘It is most unwise and imprudent of her,’ she said to herself, as she turned away from the window—in which perhaps she was more right than she knew.

They had not hurried themselves. It was to be their parting, and their parting for three months. Gilbert on this point had been firm. Nothing was to be altered of Eve’s original plans. She was to go abroad with her sister the next day, as arranged, he remaining behind; and for the three months that she was to be absent no one was to be informed

of what had passed. He would not even admit that a definite engagement existed between them. Only on her return, should she still be willing to marry him, after four months of absence and reflection, would he allow it to be announced. These were the terms of his surrender, and hard though they were, Eve had no alternative but to submit.

‘And you understand,’ he said—‘you understand that you are free, absolutely free?’

‘Absolutely free,’ she repeated after him, with a smile which, wistful as it was, had a shade of mockery in it. ‘I will remember. What else have you to tell me?’

‘My temper is bad,’ he said, half serious, half laughing. Again she smiled.

‘Yes,’ she assented, ‘your temper is bad. Go on.’

‘What is the use?’ he said. ‘You are determined to run on your fate.’

‘You have found that out at last? Oh, Gilbert!’—they had reached the lodge-gates, and he stood still; she knew he would come no farther. Her smile died away. ‘Must we part?—it is hard. Four months is so long!’

He did not answer at once. He was struggling with the temptation to give way to himself no less than to her; but he conquered it.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘In this, at least, I am sure I am right. You must go, and go free. See, I give you nothing—ask nothing from you—no promise, no pledge. I keep your ring—that was a parting gift—and I shall keep it always, whatever happens—the ring that other man gave you.’ For a moment his face darkened. ‘Eve, tell me,’ he said abruptly—‘you loved him?’

‘I thought I loved him,’ she said, very low.

He smiled, crushing down, though not

without an effort, the unreasonable retrospective jealousy.

‘Well, never mind,’ he said; ‘at any rate, whatever comes after, you have loved me too.’

‘Too?’ she repeated, faltering. ‘Too? Oh, Gilbert, it is not that. I did love Harry, but this is different. If you were to die——’ she broke off, her face blanched by a sudden terror.

He laughed, though not quite steadily.

‘Why should I?’ he said. ‘I, at least, am not too good to live, and I have scarcely had a day’s illness in my life. I used to think the probability of a long life a doubtful blessing, but now——’

‘And so you will give me nothing?’ she said, a little later. ‘Ah, I have one gift, at least, of yours. Do you remember it—the reliquary?’

The memory of the day when he had given it to her flashed across him.

‘ You will marry the *forçat* after all,’ he said, with a smile that was a little forced.

A few minutes later she was making her way alone up the avenue, under the great trees where she had parted from him the day that he had been insulted in her house. A proud and sweet smile touched her lips, though the tears were still wet upon her face, as she remembered it. She knew that, as far as in her lay, she had repaired the insult. In her presence General Cartwright had refused him his hand. She had given him, had voluntarily, almost unasked, laid at his feet, all that she had to give—herself.





CHAPTER VI.

ONE morning, about five weeks after Eve had left England, Sir Cyril was disturbed, as he sat smoking in his study, by a visit from General Cartwright.

It was still early and an unusual hour for a call, especially from a visitor of the General's punctilious and formal habits; and it was with slight surprise that Cyril rose to meet him, coupled with the sense of having been taken unawares and interrupted; though, had the young man been obliged to give an account of the nature of the occupations in which he had

been engaged, he would not have found them easy to specify.

Cyril had been changed of late, though the difference might not have been apparent to any but a close observer. His temper had been more irritable than usual, though it was at all times apt to be uncertain, and his face had grown to wear an expression both harassed and anxious, which his mother noted with secret uneasiness, though with rare discretion she had refrained from commenting upon it.

He had been, in fact, perpetually haunted by the recollection of the discovery which he had believed himself to have made concerning Eve Carrington before her departure. He did not, it is true, regard what he had then believed himself to have learnt as a certainty, and the more it receded into the distance the more improbable—almost impossible—did it seem that his conjecture should have been

well founded. He had striven to convince himself that he must have been mistaken, had told himself again and again, with angry iteration, that he had no proof, that he had no grounds to go upon save his own vague impressions, and that the very idea that she could have given her heart to such a man as Verschoyle was dishonouring to the woman he loved; yet try as he might to resist it, crushed down as it seemed at times, the conviction remained, in spite of all his efforts, in the background of his mind, and always awaiting its opportunity to thrust itself upon him in unexpected moments, that Eve loved Gilbert Verschoyle.

And yet were it so, supposing that it were true that she cared for him, how was that fact to be reconciled with others? what was the explanation of the present state of affairs? What possible object could there be in a concealment which, as he knew, was so alien and

foreign to her whole character? It was not shame that deterred her from an avowal—that, knowing her, he knew; still less, if she loved him, would worldly prudence avail or weigh in the balance to make her hesitate to marry him, mistress of her own actions as she was. Was it possible that he was indifferent to her? Cyril dismissed that supposition at once. But then, what could the explanation be; and what was the cause of the trouble which, on the very day that stood out so darkly in his memory, she had told him, in answer to his question, that she was meeting alone? Again and again as he reviewed the circumstances, so far as they were known to him, he had to own himself baffled. When she came home—so he told himself—then he would be able to judge, if not before. For in the meantime one practical question suggested itself to him perpetually for solution—namely, whether he should or should not

follow her and her sister to Nice, to try his fortune there. It was this last question which he was considering, deeply and anxiously, when his meditations were put an end to for the present by General Cartwright's entrance, and he rose, as has been said, with a sense of interruption, to meet him.

‘I ought to apologize for disturbing you so early,’ said the General, as he came forward and took Courtney's hand; ‘but you must excuse me, for I am come upon business, and I knew I should be more likely to find you at home at this hour than later. The fact is, I have had a most annoying letter this morning, and thought it best to come off at once and see you about it, especially as you are concerned in the matter no less than myself.’

‘Indeed!’ said Cyril. He imagined the General's communication most probably bore reference to some county business, and was

not unduly excited. He, however, veiled his annoyance under elaborate politeness. 'Pray sit down. I hope you do not object to the smell of smoke? I did not, as you say, expect a visitor so early, but I shall be delighted if I can be of any use.'

'I told you the matter I have come about was as much your concern as mine,' said the General, with some surliness, but taking the chair his host had pushed towards him. 'You will read the letter for yourself, of course; but perhaps it will save time if I give you the substance of it first. These lawyers are so long-winded it is difficult to a plain man to come at their meaning. It is from Trench, poor Verschoyle's lawyer, you know.'

'Yes,' said Cyril, looking up sharply. Coming upon the reflections in which he had been engaged when interrupted by the General, Verschoyle's name alone was suf-

ficient to set his nerves on edge. 'What does he write about?'

'Well, it is an awkward business. It seems there *was* another will — everybody thought it so unaccountable that there should not have been one, you know. Why, Verschoyle was not a man to talk much about his affairs—I never knew anybody closer—but he had hinted to me what were his intentions, and I was never more taken aback than when I found how it was left—that poor little girl and all——'

'But you say that there was one, after all?' asked Cyril, recalling General Cartwright somewhat impatiently from his personal reminiscences. The General's fussy garrulity was always trying to his temper, and to-day he found it particularly insufferable. 'Unless it is forthcoming, I fear no hints that Mr. Verschoyle may have let drop will be of much avail in a court of law.'

‘Of course not,’ answered the General rather shortly, nettled by the young man’s manner. ‘I was only mentioning a fact which tends to bear out the statement Trench now makes. He asserts that there was another will. He made it out himself. Verschoyle had come up to London to see him about adding a codicil, or something of the kind—quite an unimportant alteration, Trench says—when he was taken ill. Trench had seen him, and got it signed only the day before.’

‘Then what became of it?’ asked Courtney.

‘That is the question. Trench deposes to its having been in existence and in Verschoyle’s possession the day before he was taken ill. The next day he had the stroke, you know, and he died two days later.’

‘Who was with him?’ asked Courtney.

‘Ah, that is the thing,’ said the other. ‘Nobody but a servant was there when he was taken ill, but young Verschoyle was sent

for. He only arrived just before the death; his father never knew him. I heard all that at the time. Trench knows nothing about the circumstances after he left him, with the will duly signed. I am afraid it's a bad business.'

The two men looked at each other.

'Then you mean——' said Cyril.

He did not finish his sentence, but Cartwright answered as if he had.

'What else can one think?' he said. 'He is the only man whose interest it could be that the will should disappear, and it did disappear. Of course, if he had been of unblemished character, it would be a totally different matter, but things being as they are——'

'I know,' said Cyril.

Hating the man as he did, there was still something repulsive to him in thus listening to an accusation brought against him behind

his back, unanswerable as it might be. And yet—if it were so? He turned and spoke sharply.

‘If Trench was in possession all the time of the facts he now produces, why has he not spoken sooner? It must be six months since the death took place.’

‘Ah, he explains that,’ said Cartwright. ‘He was ill himself at the time, and it was only at Verschoyle’s special request that he went to see him. It was the last piece of business he did before he broke down altogether. He gave up the week after, and has not been allowed to touch a paper since—till just now. Went abroad, too, I think he says’—glancing over the letter—‘yes, a long sea voyage.’

‘To what effect was the will?’ asked Cyril. ‘Does he mention that?’

‘Yes; it was just what might have been expected. He cut his son out altogether—

left him without a penny, except his mother's fortune, which he had always paid over to him. Everything was to go to Dorothy, with you and me as joint guardians and executors. Here, you had better look over the letter yourself. It cost me a good hour's work this morning to make out what the fellow meant; he takes such roundabout ways of saying it.'

He passed it to Courtney, who read it carefully through before he returned it.

'What do you propose to do?' he asked.

'That is what I came to consult you about. Look at it which way you please, it is a confoundedly awkward business. Of course, there is just the possibility that Verschoyle may have changed his mind at the last moment. No one who knew him would believe it; but no matter. My own idea is that the straightforward thing to do is to go to Verschoyle himself, ask him the question

straight out, and see if he has any explanation to offer.'

'Explanation!' said Cyril. 'What explanation can there be? If your suspicions are true, he will simply deny all knowledge of the business. It is the only thing he can do. A man who forges and cheats will not stick at a lie.'

'Still he ought to be asked,' persisted the General. 'He ought to know what he is accused of. Of course it will remain for the lawyers to say what steps, if any, can be taken in the absence of proof that Verschoyle himself did not destroy the will in the twenty-four hours that elapsed between the time Trench saw him and when he was taken ill. I know nothing about these matters. Still it seems to me we have no right to give up Dorothy's property, or the guardianship of the child either, to a scoundrel like her brother without making sure that it is impossible to reclaim it. Of course one could do the business by letter;

but I think the manly thing is to go and see the fellow, and question him to his face. That is what I meant to ask you to do. I have the carriage here now—why not come on at once? We should be more likely to find him in the morning, and it is always well to get a disagreeable business over.'

Courtney hesitated, glancing toward the window. It was a cold, raw day, and a drizzling rain was falling.

'Are you in a close carriage?' he asked. The question was partly prompted by a genuine desire for information, partly to gain time. Under any circumstances he would have detested the office General Cartwright wished him to assume; but, regarding Verschoyle as he did, in spite of himself, as the man in whom, to say the least, Eve took an interest, and as therefore occupying the position of his own rival, it was specially repugnant to him to be called upon to take an

active and, as it were, judicial part against him. Had his former suspicions been verified he had, it is true, entertained the idea of going to Verschoyle, of insulting him to his face, of telling him that he was unfit even to associate with Eve Carrington in any degree whatsoever, and that by winning her affections clandestinely he had acted in a manner which, though it might have been expected of him, was a course which no man possessing a remnant of a sense of honour could have brought himself to pursue under his circumstances ; and of charging him openly with having traded upon her inexperience and ignorance of the world. Such was the course that commended itself to his nature, alike weak and violent ; but to go to his enemy in General Cartwright's company, and to confront him calmly and judicially with an accusation relating to one crime, whilst bound to be silent concerning another which in his eyes

was of so much graver proportions ; to be obliged to treat the man he hated with civility and courtesy, was antipathetic to him in the extreme. Yet he felt it must be done. Whilst General Cartwright, with sublime scorn for the effeminacy of the young men of the present day, was explaining that he *had* come in the brougham, he had made up his mind that the thing could not be shirked.

‘ Very well,’ he said. ‘ Yes—I believe you are right. I will come.’

* * * * *

At the time when, unknown to himself, Gilbert Verschoyle was the subject of discussion between General Cartwright and Cyril Courtney, unaware of the clouds which had gathered over him, he was sitting in his library, engaged in cleaning his gun, and reflecting meanwhile upon affairs in general and his own in particular.

Things were at last going well with him, so

he thought. He was ready to acknowledge that he had despaired too soon of life and its chances, too soon given way to the conviction that the past was irretrievable. He would find a way to retrieve it—so he told himself, with a new hopefulness springing up within him—and if not, Eve was ready to risk it, and she should have her way. After all she might be right; there were better things than the world's approval, a higher tribunal which might acquit or cancel the sentence where it condemned.

Since Eve's departure, he had passed his days in the same monotonous routine as before, reading, shooting, riding; and always as before alone, except for the occasional companionship of his little sister or the casual visits of Mr. Erskine, with whom he had insensibly grown to be on familiar if not intimate terms.

The winter had set in early, and a sharp frost had put an end to hunting, throwing

him thus more than ever on his own resources ; but if the days seemed to lag and the long dark evenings to lengthen themselves out unconscionably, he no longer rebelled against the life he was leading. There was a limit to it now, a term set to the period for which it was to last ; at length, for the first time for years, he was not without something towards which to look, and he was happy, though like others he misnamed his happiness, and called it expectation.

For the first time Eve had that day broken, not indeed the letter, but the spirit of his stipulation that no correspondence should pass between them during her absence. It was a hard condition, but he had adhered to it steadily ; he would not draw her, irresponsible as she was to anyone but herself for her actions, into what might have had the semblance of a clandestine correspondence. But that morning had brought him not a

letter, but a box of great purple violets, still fresh and sweet. No note had accompanied them—so far she had obeyed him; but he would not have needed her handwriting on the address to tell him from whom they came. He had smiled as he opened the package, and for the first time had wondered whether his conditions had been necessary, and wavered in his resolution to carry them out faithfully. Might he not, at least, send her a word in acknowledgment of the gift? It was as he was asking himself the question, half smiling at the irresolution to which he was so little accustomed in himself, that the door was thrown open, and Sir Cyril Courtney and General Cartwright were announced.

Gilbert rose to his feet, and stood facing his guests with a vague presentiment of evil. What could have brought them to his house—the man who had insulted him and declined his acquaintance, and the man who had sys

tematically ignored him whenever, as had more than once happened, chance had brought them face to face—the man who was Eve's lover? Even in his first surprise, it was this last thought that had pre-eminence as he looked at Cyril. Was it possible—the idea flashed across his mind, unreasonable though it was—was it possible that his presence now had anything to do with her? Had any rumours transpired concerning himself and Miss Carrington; and if so, by what right had these men come to interfere? His face darkened as the suspicion crossed his mind. Whatever the right or the wrong of the matter might be, whatever had been his own doubts and his own misgivings, no man living should come between him and the woman he loved. The thoughts passed through his mind with the quickness of lightning. He had risen as they entered, but had neither spoken nor offered his hand, only

bowing with stiff formality. He could see that the General was nervous, and that even Courtney's manner betrayed some embarrassment. For a second none of the three spoke. It was the master of the house who, after that momentary pause, broke the silence.

‘May I ask to what I owe the honour of this visit?’ he asked, looking from one to the other.

Cartwright answered.

‘We have called upon you—Sir Cyril Courtney and I—Mr. Verschoyle,’ he said, ‘upon a painful errand.’

He paused again. Gilbert never spoke. He was standing facing the men whom he instinctively felt to be his enemies, leaning one hand upon the table, and looking full at them with his straight, direct glance.

‘I received a communication this morning,’ went on the General, ‘which made us feel it our duty to come and ask if you had any

explanation to offer of the circumstances to which it refers.'

Again he stopped. He had been hitherto speaking the words with which he had come prepared ; but he found the situation more embarrassing than he had anticipated. Gilbert's whole aspect—his very bearing and manner—made it more difficult than he had expected, angry as he was with himself for being thus influenced, to tell him to his face that he was suspected of a base and dishonourable fraud.

'You had better read the communication to which I allude,' he ended abruptly. 'You will see for yourself to what it refers.'

He handed him the letter. Gilbert took it in silence, feeling a faint relief as he glanced at the first lines that it had evidently nothing to do with Eve—that her name at least was not to be brought forward. That being so, he was fairly indifferent as to what else it

might contain, or so he thought as he looked through the first sentences, referring chiefly to the causes which had kept Mr. Trench hitherto silent. But as he went further, his face changed. In absolute silence he read it through, slowly and deliberately, from end to end, word for word, without haste or hurry, then folded it up and returned it to General Cartwright, still without comment.

‘Well,’ said the old man impatiently, ‘you have read it—what have you got to say?’

‘Nothing,’ said Gilbert. ‘I have no explanation to offer.’

He was no longer looking at them, though the eyes of both the other men were upon him, but vacantly down at the ground; he spoke mechanically in a voice curiously devoid of tone and expression. He was, in fact, almost unconscious of their presence, as if a blow had been dealt him, leaving him stunned by the shock. And yet he realized, vividly and com-

pletely, the whole case in all its bearings: the loss of the will, however it had happened—that signified little; the natural, almost necessary, inference; his own character, his own past, rising again to condemn him. And all throughout, as he read the letter, as he now stood confronting his accusers, in the background of his mind Eve had been present to his consciousness almost as if in bodily presence; he saw the very quiver of her mouth, her blue eyes, heard his own voice telling her that after all he had been right—she wrong. How sweet the violets were!—where had she gathered them?—he was sure that she had gathered them herself . . . she—— General Cartwright's voice roused him. Scarcely ten seconds had passed since he had spoken.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘You have nothing to say, no explanation to offer? Surely you understand, Mr. Verschoyle, painful as it is to me to say so to your father’s

son, that unless the matter can be cleared up very grave suspicions must rest upon you. You do not imagine that Sir Cyril and myself, who you will perceive were made trustees under the will to which Mr. Trench refers, can allow the matter to rest where it is.'

'Sir Cyril Courtney and yourself will, of course, take what steps you think fit. I repeat that I have no explanation to offer.'

He had pulled himself together at General Cartwright's tone and words, and spoke with quiet indifference not untouched with contempt. Courtney, who had not spoken or taken any part in the proceedings till then, came a little forward. He had been watching the scene with keen absorbed interest.

'Was no one else with Mr. Verschoyle?' he asked.

Gilbert for the first time turned to him. As he did so there was a slight change in his

manner, as if it cost him an effort to maintain his tone of cold courtesy.

‘No one but a servant. Perhaps you would like to question him?’ Without waiting for an answer he rang the bell. ‘Send Jenkinson here,’ he ordered the man who appeared in answer to it.

There was a silence. Again Gilbert had relapsed into his own reflections; again Eve’s shadowy presence was beside him—he could almost feel the touch of her soft hands. Again he heard himself asking her if to her love she added trust—the trust that no one else had given, and listened to her low vibrating tones as she answered, ‘After God, you.’ Yes, she had trusted him; she——

The door opened and Jenkinson entered, and stood waiting for orders. Gilbert turned.

‘These gentlemen have some questions to put to you, Jenkinson,’ he said.

He turned away, and stood leaning against

the chimney-piece as if it was a matter with which he had no concern.

‘After God, you.’ Would she trust him still, or would she believe that he had followed up the single damning sin of his youth by one as cowardly and treacherous, and which he had, moreover, kept concealed from her? No, he knew her too well to give the disloyal suggestion so much as a passing harbourage. She would trust him still, though never again should he hear her tell him so—though she should marry the man who had come to accuse him—to insult him to his face—she would trust him still; he knew her. What he had told her himself she would believe—nothing more.

He was only dimly conscious that Cartwright was putting Jenkinson through a close cross-examination. When it was over, and the man had left the room, the General addressed him again.

‘You see your servant bears out Trench’s statement,’ he said. ‘He recollects the lawyer’s visit, and was, in fact, himself one of the witnesses of the codicil to which Trench refers.’

Gilbert bowed, making no comment.

‘Have you nothing to say?’ went on the old man. ‘Even now, if you would speak out, it might be arranged . . . no one has any desire to make a scandal——’

Gilbert interrupted him, raising his hand with a slight imperative gesture.

‘I have told you already that I have nothing to say,’ he said. ‘Shall we consider the matter closed?’

It was a dismissal, and so the other men felt it. General Cartwright rose at once, and took his leave with cold civility. He had already turned away when Cyril came forward. He had been puzzled and perplexed throughout the whole interview. Something in

Gilbert's bearing, in the whole manner and air of the man, disagreeable, almost offensive, as it had been, had, in spite of himself, shaken his conviction of his guilt, whilst it had gone far, also in spite of himself, to strengthen another conviction. Now that he had been brought face to face with Gilbert Verschoyle, it no longer seemed to him so impossible, so unnatural, that in spite of the character he bore, in spite of his damaged reputation and his undoubted antecedents, Eve should love him. It was characteristic of his impulsive and not ungenerous nature that the very facts which made Verschoyle a more dangerous rival, attracted rather than repelled him—giving him an ashamed sense, genuine if transitory, of having taken the part of the strong against the weak, and struck a man who was down. He held out his hand.

‘Good-bye,’ he said.

Gilbert looked full at him for a moment,

then without seeming to see his proffered hand he bowed and turned away. Cyril coloured hotly as he followed General Cartwright out of the room.

‘It’s a bad business,’ said the latter, as they drove away from the house. ‘Of course he did it—it is as plain as a pikestaff. To do him justice he does not deny it; but his father’s son and all—it’s a bad business.’

‘You feel sure he is guilty?’ asked Sir Cyril absently. Still smarting from Gilbert’s rejection of his hand, he did not, nevertheless, feel so sure as the General appeared to be.

‘Sure? I wish I were not. I wish there could be any doubt about the matter; but it seems to me that it is as plain as facts can make it. And yet it is curious—the fellow looks like a gentleman, and behaves like one—no bluster about him—his father’s son all over. Well, we must write to Trench and ask his advice as to what is to be done.’

He sighed as he relapsed into unusual silence, which Cyril made no effort to break. He was still wondering, as he went over the past scene again and again in his mind, what was the meaning of it all. Was it innocence or effrontery—the two opposites which wear the same livery?





CHAPTER VII.

WHEN his visitors were gone, Gilbert remained still and motionless. Half an hour—an hour—passed, and found him leaning his back against the chimney-piece in the same attitude. The gong sounded, and he roused himself to send word that he was busy and would not go in to luncheon, relapsing, as the door closed upon the servant, into his former abstraction.

Yet he was scarcely thinking consciously of the blow which had fallen upon him with such unexpectedness. He was thinking neither of the future nor of the present ; he was not, indeed, conscious of definite thought

at all, as he sat leaning his head upon his hand and looking into the fire ; it was rather as if a variety of images, bearing no distinct relationship to what had just taken place, were passing in dreamy succession through his brain.

In all of them Eve was the central figure ; Eve as he had seen her first, on the occasion of Patricia's final rejection of him, though he had scarcely noticed her at the time ; then parting from him at Mace on the day that he had driven her there. He saw her as if it had been but yesterday, standing in her white dress in the yellow afternoon light, as she wished him good-bye. Then again, she was asking him on the moor to go and see her—extending to him once more her soft right hand of pity and fellowship. Why had he yielded ? he asked himself, with unavailing remorse ; why had he not abided by the instinct which had prompted his refusal ? It

was there that he had been guilty of his first fatal mistake. He remembered her blind unfounded confidence in his innocence, unsuspected at first by himself, recalling the day when it had at last been borne in upon him, and when yet he had gone from her leaving her faith unshattered ; her face rose before him when at length she had learnt the truth of his guilt. He remembered with a tender pride, her loyalty since ; and, last of all, their parting in the wind and snow.

And now—what now? He forced himself at length to turn to the future. It had been there, lying, as it were, latent in his consciousness, all the time, though he had refused to look at it, lingering over those images of the past, across which, nevertheless, its shadow fell. But he could put it away no longer ; at last it must be faced, and from the first, from the very moment that he had read the lawyer's letter and had realized the position, as he

would have realized it even if he had not seen his accusation written in the face of the men who confronted him, he had known what that future must be. Strange though it may seem, from the first resistance had never occurred to him, nor any endeavour to clear himself from the suspicion which rested upon him and to assert his innocence. Opposition and defiance had indeed been the rule, the habit, of his life ; but this last blow had been too unexpected and overpowering, and he was only conscious of a dull acquiescence. He scarcely so much as resented the accusation, accepting it rather as a Mahometan accepts the decrees of fate, and with something of the same spirit of submission, foreign to his character and to his habits as such a submission was.

The strange inconsistencies of human nature are so glaring that they always startle us, although they are so common that it would be more reasonable to be astonished by their

opposite. The courageous have their element of weakness, and it only depends upon the moment when that element obtains the upper hand whether they shall be branded as cowards for ever ; the gentlest have their moments of passion, when, like Moses, they may give the lie to a lifetime of patience. To Gilbert there had come one of those sudden and strange transformations, such as make the brave man a coward, the honest a liar. The bow had been tightened too long, and now at last it had snapped.

For eleven years he had been at war with mankind, fighting his way through life with a dogged determination not to be beaten, opposing to the mistrust for which he had given just cause a proud and stubborn defiance ; but now all at once, taken unawares, at the moment when life was for the first time brightening before him, the clouds which had overshadowed it lifting, and brought face to face

with a false accusation, he suddenly dropped his weapons and surrendered, without a struggle and unconditionally. At last he allowed that fate, whom he had defied, was too strong for him. In the very moment that he had imagined her to be conquered, or at least propitiated, she had risen to assert her power, and at length he bowed to her. A sullen submission had replaced his former defiance ; the fight was in vain ; he owned himself conquered.

Perhaps, had he stood as before, alone, it might have been different ; he might still have carried on the struggle. It was, above all, the recollection of Eve which unnerved him and took away his power of resistance. By a strange contradiction the very thought which had been before the source of his strength, which had lent him courage—a courage caught from her own—to defy the world and to oppose to its enmity, not, as

formerly, a proud contempt, but the more powerful armour and defence of a hope—that thought was now become all at once the occasion of his weakness. It was for her that his courage failed him ; at the thought of what might lie before her that his power of endurance, his nerve, broke down.

He recalled, sitting alone in the darkening winter afternoon, his life as it had been for the last eleven years ; and as incidents almost unnoticed at the time sprang into vividness, each carrying its special significance and sting, and each an earnest and a prophecy of what was to come, for the first time he shrank back from the prospect of the future.

He knew it must be faced, but it should be faced alone. No other, least of all the woman whom he loved, should be involved in the ruin of his life. Alone he would know how to meet it—would know how to live down even this new accusation ; but not with her ;

not with the consciousness that every blow struck at him glanced aside to her, that each slight or insult found its way past him to her. It was true that, for a brief moment, under the influence of her fearless faith, he too had imagined that the past might be retrieved, the future redeemed ; he had, seeing with her eyes, caught a glimpse of another world—a realm of recaptured possibilities, where the bondmen of this world and of its opinion might shake off their fetters and go free under a higher law and a purer government ; but it had vanished like a dream. This new blow had come to open his eyes, so he thought, to the unreality of the vision.

‘I could not do it,’ he said, rising at last, and leaning his elbows on the mantel-shelf. ‘I am right, but even if it were not so—right or wrong, I could not face it. There are things beyond a man’s power of endurance.’

It was true. It *was* no longer a case of

right and wrong. In the overstrained and morbid condition in which he then was, a future, as he pictured it, shared with Eve Carrington, held a positive terror for him, from which, cowardly or not, he recoiled with a shrinking dread.

It was late in the afternoon when he sat down to write to her. That, at least, must be done at once. He was feverishly impatient to close, as it were, his accounts, and to have done with his reckoning with the past.

It was the first time he had written to her, except one short note which had accompanied a book he had lent her in the early days of their acquaintance. How little he had thought, even a few hours ago, that his first letter would be such a one as this ! He remembered it, as he took up the pen and began rapidly, with no preface.

‘I am writing to you to say good-bye,’ he said. ‘After all, I was right. You had per-

suaded me that the past might be retrieved, and the future redeemed; and for a moment I, too, thought it possible. But I know now that it was not possible—that it was merely a dream with which we deluded ourselves because we loved each other. I know now that the past must dog my footsteps through life; and it is only by having my eyes opened in time that I have, by God's mercy, been saved from letting it dog yours too. I need not tell you all the circumstances which have brought me to my senses—you will hear them soon enough from others. They believe that I have followed up my former sin by another—a more cowardly and treacherous one still; and I cannot disprove their suspicion, neither can I blame them for it. It has, at least, come in time to show me that the future of which we have dreamed is an impossible one, and so far it is well. For ourselves, nothing remains but to say good-bye.'

So far he had written rapidly, and without pausing to consider or weigh the words as they suggested themselves; but now he stopped, and, laying down the pen, leant back in his chair. He was resisting the temptation to tell her something at least of what that farewell meant to him; to say that in it he was taking leave of all that made life fair or endurable; that in the world of thorns, and briars, and thistles to which he was of his own will banishing himself, her presence would go with him; to assure her of his unchangeable fidelity. But yet he would not write the words; not one syllable would he say that should in the days to come, even in imagination, bind her to him by the spiritual bond of an enduring and mutual faith; not one word would he write that should stand between her and future happiness.

In this at least, whatever were his faults

towards her, he was brave. He would not set her free in letter, to keep her bound to him in spirit ; he would rather strive, loyally and honestly, to erase himself from her life so far as might be. It was his plain duty, and he would perform it, whatever it might cost him ; nay, more, whatever at the time it might cost her. He would not attempt to give her present comfort at the cost of future happiness. Yet five—ten minutes passed before once more he took up the pen, and his mouth was set and hard as he wrote the next words :

‘ What I said to you once before I say again—it is not infidelity to forget ; and if happiness comes—as I pray God it may—receive it kindly. For myself, I shall leave England at once. I do not yet know where I shall go ; but I shall have left this place before you receive this letter. For the rest, I cannot begin to tell you what you have been to me ; neither can I talk of gratitude

between us. The fewest words are best. God bless you.—Gilbert Verschoyle.’

In a hastily added postscript, he asked that, as before, what had passed between them should remain unknown; and then, sealing the letter, he directed it, and gave it to be taken at once to the post. He would not trust himself. Once more he was alone, when the door opened, and his sister timidly entered.

‘What is it?’ he asked, turning at the sound. ‘Ah, Dorothy, is it you? Do you want anything?’

‘I came——’ she began, then breaking off as, approaching nearer, she caught sight of his face. ‘Are you ill, Gilbert—what is the matter—has anything happened?’

‘Ill? No,’ he answered, rather impatiently. ‘Why should you think so?’

‘I don’t know—you look ill,’ said the child uneasily. ‘Has nothing happened?’

He did not answer at once. He had risen, and gone to stand over the fire; and for a minute he was silent whilst he reflected. Should he tell her what was the matter? had she not, child as she was, a sort of right to hear it from himself? Of course, she must know soon. He would rather, it was true, that somebody else had told her. It was wearisome; he would have preferred to go without an explanation, leaving it to others to explain the matter to her in any way they pleased; it was nothing to him what view of the subject she might take, what construction she might put upon his silence; but, still, since it had so fallen out that she had asked him the question, he would not refuse to answer.

‘Something has happened,’ he said, after that brief review of the situation. ‘Perhaps I had better tell you myself. It seems my father did make a will, after all—such a one as might have been expected. By it he left

all his property to you, and you yourself to the guardianship of General Cartwright and Sir Cyril Courtney. This will was never found, as you know, and they accuse me of having made away with it.'

He had made his statement of the case with as cool an unconcern as if it were something with which he himself had nothing to do. Dorothy, however, flushed crimson as she answered.

'You—you did not do it?' she said, faltering.

It was clear that, fond of her brother as she had become, the thing did not strike her as altogether impossible. Trained as she had been, perhaps it was natural that it should be so. That he had been guilty of one act of dishonesty she knew, and she no more than others could at once reject the possibility of his having committed another. Gilbert half smiled.

'No,' he said; 'I did not do it. That,

however, makes little difference, since I cannot disprove my guilt.'

'But they would believe you,' cried the child eagerly. 'If you told them——'

'No,' he said, 'that is just it ; they would *not* believe me. Why should they ?'

There was a silence. Dorothy, young as she was, was sufficiently astute to understand the justice of his words. Why, indeed, should they believe him ? As Sir Cyril himself had said a few hours ago, would a man who cheated and forged stick at a lie ? There was a painful pause.

'What shall you do ?' she asked at last.

'I shall go away—probably abroad. My father had a right to do what he pleased with his own, and it seems certain that whatever became of the will—whether it is found or not—the property is yours by right. At any rate, I shall not dispute it. I leave England to-morrow.'

‘Leave England!’ she exclaimed. Again her mind had grasped with shrewd promptitude the consequences of such a course of action as her brother indicated; would it not be tantamount to a confession of guilt? ‘Gilbert, you cannot do that. They—they would say——’ She broke off, once more colouring violently.

‘That I have run away? I do not think that matters,’ he answered rather absently. ‘At any rate, the world’s opinion of me is not so high, as it is, that I need take it into account.’

He smiled mechanically, moving at the same time as if to close the conversation; but Dorothy did not take the hint. She even laid a detaining hand on his sleeve.

‘But, Gilbert,’ she cried, ‘you have not told me what is to become of me?’

He stopped and looked at her. The question had, in truth, not presented itself to him.

‘ You ?’ he said, pausing again. ‘ That, you know, it will no longer rest with me to decide. With what belongs to you, I naturally give up the guardianship of yourself—into hands better fitted to take care of both.’

A sob rose in the child’s throat. Unintentionally he was cruel. Only a few months ago her father had been alive, with whom she had always been the chief object ; now she felt absolutely alone, and a sense of dreariness and desolation was stealing over her calm, well-regulated mind, together with a keen sense of mortification and wounded affection. Gilbert was all she had left, and unconsciously and involuntarily, in the absence of anything else to love, she had attached herself to him, in spite of his open indifference. He was at least some one who belonged to her, some one upon whom she had a claim even though he ignored it ; he was her only brother, her only near relation, and he spoke of leaving her, as

far as either of them knew, for ever, with as absolute an indifference as if she had been a stranger with whom he had no concern. It was too much. Yet she made one more effort at dignity.

‘I do not think,’ she said slowly, though with a quiver in her voice, ‘that it is—kind to leave me.’

Gilbert was impatient at her persistence, but yet he laughed.

‘My dear child,’ he said, ‘believe me, it is the kindest thing I could possibly do. I should have thought you knew enough of the world to know that.’

He bent and touched her forehead with his lips. It was a cold perfunctory kiss, but yet as he gave it, Dorothy’s self-control gave way. To his dismayed astonishment she burst into a storm of tears, from which it was some time before she was sufficiently recovered either to answer his remonstrances or to give any

explanation. When she did speak it was between her sobs, with angry vehemence.

‘You don’t care for me,’ she said; ‘you never did, and you are my only brother; I have no one else. I don’t want to have the money. I don’t want to stay behind. I don’t care about General Cartwright or Sir Cyril Courtney. I want you to take me with you.’

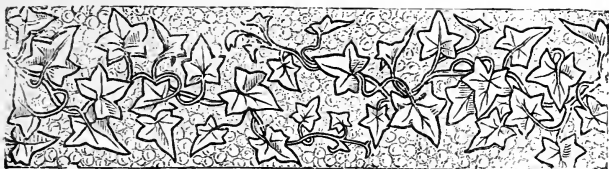
Gilbert was surprised, even touched. He felt, with that part of him which, in his still half-stunned condition, was able to take any interest in the matter, that here was one hostage which he had won from the world’s opinion; he was dimly aware that even his little sister’s affection might under other circumstances have been worth having. But it came at a moment when it was an embarrassment rather than anything else. He spoke with decision, though kindly.

‘I cannot take you with me, Dorothy,’ he

said. 'Our lives will lie apart for the future ; but I will not forget you. I am sorry if I have seemed to fail in any brotherly duty towards you ; but I am, at any rate, believe me, doing the best I can for you now. And now I must be busy. I shall leave this to-morrow.'

It was a dismissal, and Dorothy did not attempt to dispute it. Indeed, well trained as she was in the conventionality which considers display of sentiment out of taste, especially when the object of it is one so doubtful as she still felt her brother to be, she was already somewhat ashamed of her unusual outbreak, and said good-night quietly before going upstairs to wash her reddened eyelids previous to appearing in the presence of her governess.

Yet her heart was heavy, and her attention wandered as she sat preparing her German exercise that evening.



CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. ROSS, established with her sister in an apartment at Nice, was having what she herself would have described as a remarkably good time. Her past, so far as it had been unfortunate, was retrieved, her future assured, and she was accordingly free to make the most of the present.

Now that she had had ample time for reflection, Patricia was still of opinion that she had done well for herself. It may be that, though from the first she had cherished few illusions on the subject, Lord Ralston's character, as she became better acquainted with it, had not

presented itself altogether in a light of increasing interest or attraction ; but then, as Mrs. Ross frankly observed, it was impossible to have everything ; he was rich, he was kind, he had a certain position, was fond enough and not oppressively fond of herself, and she was not the least inclined to complain or to go back upon her bargain. She was, indeed, a woman who possessed to a remarkable extent that by no means too common gift—an absolute genius for making the best of life. It is a talent which belongs chiefly, if not entirely, to the disillusioned ; to those who have the courage to look at life as it is, and to accept it as such, and it is possessed in common by the worst and by the best specimens of the race.

Once, when she had been enumerating the advantages of the present arrangement to her sister, she digressed from the subject in hand to give her views of life in general, and the

duty of making the best of it in particular, in which duty, like others who find it possible, she was a devout believer.

‘It is your own fault if you are not happy,’ she had observed. ‘People are so fond of laying the blame upon circumstances; but after all they have very little to do with it—of course they make it easier or harder, but that is all. I feel I am in a position to speak, because they have always done their worst for me.’

‘Until now,’ Eve had corrected with a half-smile.

‘Well, yes,’ assented her sister rather dubiously. ‘I suppose it might be said that my luck has turned at last; but yet I don’t know. That, again, is because I compel circumstances. I know many women,’ with characteristic candour, ‘who would not have been satisfied to marry Ralston. At all events, it has nothing to do with my argument, which is, that I have

always managed to be happy in spite of everything.'

'And you think that happiness which is a matter of management deserves the name?' asked Eve.

Yet she had not found it so difficult as she might formerly have done to give credence to her sister's theory. She was, as Mrs. Ross had more than once observed to herself of late, altered. It was not that she was less quiet than before; rather, had it been possible, Patricia would have said that she was quieter—the shadow of a great joy, almost as stilling and hushing in its effects as that of a sorrow, was upon her—but still there was a difference which her sister, without understanding it, noted, deciding that, if she had not indeed alarmed herself altogether unnecessarily on the subject, the girl's interest in Verschoyle had evidently partaken only of the nature of a mere passing

fancy which change of scene had already sufficed to cure.

One afternoon—it was the end of November, but the weather was warm and the windows stood open—Mrs. Ross was receiving a visit from an old acquaintance who had recently arrived at Nice. Her friendship with Mr. Lloyd belonged to that period of her widowhood immediately preceding the appearance of Verschöyle on the scene, and had been of a more or less intimate and familiar type, though circumstances had brought it to a somewhat abrupt conclusion; and the two had met again with pleasure, enhanced, perhaps, on the one side and the other, by the consciousness that Mrs. Ross's engagement set them free to carry their friendship to what limits they pleased without running any risk of inconvenient consequences. On this particular afternoon, however, Mr. Lloyd had been less entertaining and more sentimental than usual, so that Mrs.

Ross looked up with something of relief when her sister's entrance came to interrupt their *tête-à-tête*.

‘Ah, Eve, you are come in?’ she said. ‘You don’t mind my sister hearing too?’ she went on, turning to her visitor. ‘Mr. Lloyd is telling me a most exciting story—quite a true one, too—did you not say so?’ to the evidently discomfited guest.

Eve looked from one to the other, conscious of the mockery in Patricia’s tone. Mr. Lloyd, for his part, rose rather hastily.

‘Another time,’ he said. ‘I am so sorry, Miss Carrington, but I have just remembered an engagement.’

‘You really must go?’ said Mrs. Ross; ‘then good-bye. Be sure and come and finish the story another time; it is cruel to leave off in the most interesting part. My dear Eve,’ as the door closed on him, ‘I am glad you came in, that young man was grow-

ing insufferably tedious. He was just telling me the story of his life, and it promised to be one without an end. If he were not so good-looking he would be insupportable. I wonder what I used to see in him to like. I knew him just before I was engaged to Mr. Verschoyle. Sometimes I think he—Gilbert, I mean—spoilt me for other men. He was disagreeable often enough—I never was sure whether I liked or hated him; but he never bored me, and——’

Mrs. Ross stopped short, suddenly becoming aware that she was talking to herself. Eve had gone straight out on to the balcony. Patricia shrugged her shoulders as she glanced after her.

‘I wonder whether there was ever anything between them,’ she said, as she went upstairs to repose herself before dinner. She had a little dinner-party that evening.

Eve meanwhile, on the balcony, was

leaning her elbows on the balustrade, and looking out into the soft dusk. Her thoughts had already quitted Patricia. Though she would not remain to hear Gilbert discussed, the recollection of his brief connection with her sister had lost its power to sting. She had, in fact, forgotten to quarrel with the past. She was only thinking, as she leant out into the darkness, how long the two months which had still to elapse before she was to see him again, looked as they stretched out before her ; how hard were the conditions of silence which he had imposed upon them both ! She smiled as she thought how she had for the first time infringed his rule in sending him the violets. It was her first disobedience, but he would not be hard upon her. Perhaps even—perhaps he might write—just one word. It would be something if only she could see his handwriting—hold something that he had touched—if——

‘Mademoiselle, are you there?’ it was Élise, Mrs. Ross’s maid, who spoke, standing in the window, and peering out. ‘Here are letters for you.’

Eve turned, stepping into the lighted room, and took the two letters the woman held out. The uppermost one was from Lady Courtney, but as she recognised the writing on the second the bright colour flashed into her face.

‘Thank you, Élise,’ she said quietly, as she moved towards the door under the woman’s curious eyes.

* * * * *

Mrs. Ross’s guests were assembled, and she herself was talking to them gaily, although she glanced from time to time with covert impatience towards the door. Dinner had been announced, but Eve had not yet appeared.

‘I must apologize for my sister’s unpunctuality,’ she said. ‘She is not often so late. Ah, there she is!’

The door had opened, and Eve had entered noiselessly and stood on the threshold. She was dressed in white, and her face was almost as colourless as her dress; whilst her eyes, which supplied the only touch of colour to the picture, looked before her with a gaze which was a little vacant, like that of some one who has been dreaming and is not yet fully awake. Even Patricia, careless and unobservant though she was, noticed something amiss, and was slightly startled. She rose and went towards her hastily.

‘You are not ill, Eve?’ she said. ‘Is anything the matter?’

‘No,’ answered the girl, in her clear tones; ‘oh no, not ill—only tired!’

‘The unusual closeness of the air, for the season, has no doubt knocked mademoiselle up,’ said a Frenchman who stood near; and Eve smiled as she assented politely.

Five minutes later they were seated at

dinner, and she was joining as usual in the conversation. She never knew afterwards how she had passed that evening. For months she could not smell the scent of the hot-house flowers which decked the table without a shudder, without the whole scene returning to her: the clatter of talk; Mrs. Ross's light laughter; the vapid compliments of her neighbour, the Frenchman who had suggested the heat as a reason for her pallor, and who was inclined to be sympathetic on the subject. Would the evening never end, and leave her free to be alone and to face the crushing and incomprehensible trouble which had fallen upon her? What was it? she had almost forgotten . . . Gilbert had written—he had said that they must part . . . 'You are very good, monsieur; the flowers which you were so kind as to send this morning are the most beautiful I have seen since I came to Nice' . . . he had said—what was it?—some

fresh accusation . . . if she could only remember—if M. Duprès would not talk it would come back to her. ‘Yes, there is no doubt thunder in the air; it has been hanging about all day . . .’

So it went on—the endless, interminable evening. For an hour upstairs, ever since, with her eyes shining and her hands trembling, she had opened the cruel letter, and had taken in with slow laboriousness the full meaning of its contents. she had sat in a sort of lethargy, from which she had only roused herself in time to come down and take her part in the evening. It must be done, she must go down as usual—Gilbert wished it; so she reasoned in a dull mechanical way; he had said what had passed was to rest between themselves as before, and even in that first bitterest hour she had set herself to carry out his wishes, to do his will; it was all that remained to her. For his sake, because he wished it, she had

dressed and nerved herself to come down as usual, and to take her share in what was going on, every fresh effort another evidence and result of the blind and absolute obedience which had become the law of her life.

Later in the evening, as they sat in the drawing-room, an English painter, Paul Vassall by name, who was of the party, came up and took a seat by her. He was a clever, agreeable man, and a fair artist, and they had seen a good deal of him since their arrival at Nice. He was not in love with Miss Carrington—his heart was, oddly enough, in the safe keeping of a little red-haired freckled girl in a country vicarage in Wales; but he admired her extremely, and he thought, as he looked at her to-night, that he had never admired her quite so much, whilst at the same time he felt certain that there was something wrong. He was in the habit of taking an artistic interest in human nature, and Eve had excited

his curiosity ever since he had become acquainted with her—a curiosity partly due, perhaps, to his involuntary surprise that, in spite of her gentle and friendly courtesy, and the liking she had shown for his society, he had never been able for a moment to flatter himself that he had awakened so much as a passing interest in her other than what she might have felt for any man who had taken some pains to render himself agreeable to her. Mr. Vassall, to do him justice, had no desire that she should be in love with him; but he would have liked to have drawn out in her case, as in others, that sympathy, not untouched by sentiment, which constituted the type of friendship desirable in his eyes between himself and those women in whom he was kind enough to take an interest. In the present instance he was conscious that he had not been successful, and was piqued by his failure.

He was a clever talker in an idle desultory

way, fond of playing with abstract subjects and ethical questions, into which, however, he rarely penetrated very deeply; and he had got into the habit of devoting his conversational powers to the entertainment of Miss Carrington upon the occasions on which they met. To-night he had promised himself, ever since with his quick observant eyes he had noticed her entrance, that should an opportunity occur, he would attempt to discover the meaning of the change which he had recognised at once in her face. It was, indeed, an investigation that was quite in his own line, being all in the interests of that science, dealing with human nature and emotion, which was, after his art, and even at times taking precedence of it, the study in which he indulged most constantly and with the keenest interest, and in the pursuit of which, like other devotees, he was sometimes accustomed to disregard the risk of the suffering which he might inflict in the course

of his inquiries. That the girl had suffered some blow he was certain, and he felt a natural desire to experiment upon her, with the object of, if possible, discovering its nature and extent. He began, however, with commendable caution by some observations upon art in general, and his own in particular.

‘We artists are the only people in the world who have a right to be unhappy,’ he observed, ‘since it is only we for whom failure is certain, and to whom success—meaning, of course, in one’s own eyes, which is the only success that counts at all—would mean the most deadly failure of all.’

‘You mean——’ said Eve absently. She had been only half listening, a fact which he, with his eyes upon her, noted.

‘That supposing we imagined ourselves to have succeeded, it would mean that we had made the worst failure of all—that we had

apostatized and renounced faith in an ideal—the unknown God whom ignorantly we worship, and to whom our altars are set up. That is the worst failure of which an artist is capable.’

Again Eve’s thoughts had wandered, recurring to her last meeting with Gilbert, when she had asked him ‘What is failure?’ Almost unconsciously she spoke the words again, half aloud, and Mr. Vassall caught them.

‘Ah, there you open a wide subject,’ he said. ‘Each man must answer that question for himself. You might as well try to define the ideal.’

‘And why not?’ M. Duprès, Eve’s neighbour at dinner, had sauntered up and overheard the last words. ‘Why not then define this ideal, my friend? It is surely not so impossible.’

‘For a Frenchman, certainly not,’ answered Vassall smoothly, annoyed at the interruption.

Duprès, however, went on, not perceiving, or at least taking no notice of, the sarcasm.

‘Let me supply a definition,’ he said. ‘Mademoiselle shall judge whether it is a correct one or not. Is not idealism then a great—let us say even an exaggerated, estimate of one’s own possibilities? of whose else can one judge? Am I not right? If my definition is allowed, then monsieur,’ bowing politely to Vassall, ‘has no doubt a perfect right to cherish his idealism, since who that has seen his beautiful pictures, has felt the force of his pathos, his imagination, his power of moving the heart, can doubt his claim to it?’

With another bow to Vassall he moved away, whilst the painter, disgusted and impatient, turned again to Eve.

‘Of all the insufferable——’ he began, breaking off, however, and dismissing M. Duprès, to return to the subject under discussion.

‘To an artistic eye,’ he said, half laughing, ‘the world is only redeemed by its failures. Supposing, which Heaven forbid, it were ever to succeed in becoming what it attempts to be, it would be lost. But all the same it is not much consolation, under the sense of individual defeat, to know that we are helping to add the picturesque element required; and we meet our failures at every turn—in art, in friendship, in love. For instance’—abruptly forsaking the abstract for the personal—‘for instance, Miss Carrington, you care nothing what happens to me, though I have devoted three weeks to trying to make you.’

He was partly in jest, yet not altogether; a new tone had crept into his voice, and she looked at him, roused from the abstraction in which, as he had felt with growing irritation, she had remained wrapped in spite of the half-attention with which she had listened to him. At that moment, as her eyes, questioning

and perplexed, met his, it may be doubted whether Mr. Vassall's admiration was not less purely artistic than the little red-haired girl in Wales might have altogether approved. To all men, especially artists, come such flashes of involuntary infidelity, for which they should not be too severely judged.

‘You don't care one straw what happens to me,’ he repeated.

She made no answer. As Gilbert had once said, to lie was impossible to her, and she knew that Vassall had spoken the truth. He turned away with a short laugh.

‘See my words proved,’ he said. ‘Failure meets us at every turn.’

Eve drew a long breath; she had already forgotten the personal application of the words, but they struck upon her ear like a knell.

‘Life,’ she said, ‘is failure—the terms are synonymous.’

‘And death, its opposite, success?’ he asked, surprised, yet curious; and, with a sense that she was touching upon the surface of something which, explained, might give him the clue to what he was seeking to discover, anxious to make her say more.

She did not answer at once. Vassall, looking at her with the intentness of an artist, accustomed to catch impressions and retain them for future use, was struck by the absolute stillness of the face, the sadness of the eyes, which were looking away through the window to the starlit night.

‘Perhaps,’ she said at last. There was a minute’s silence, and then she rose.

‘You will excuse me,’ she said, smiling faintly. ‘I am tired.’

She gave him her hand, then, crossing the room quickly, went out without pausing to take leave of the others, who were just then engaged in some rather noisy discussion.

Mr. Vassall, left alone, meditated. He was as sure as before that something was wrong, but as to its nature he was as much in the dark as ever. Mrs. Ross interrupted his speculations.

‘Where is Eve? Mr. Vassall, what have you done with my sister?’

‘I am sorry to say Miss Carrington has a headache,’ he replied coolly, with the instinct of defence, which comes by nature to some men. He had desired to experiment upon Eve herself, and was sensible of some irritation that he had been baffled; but he was none the less inclined to protect her from the inconvenient observations or comments of others. ‘She asked me to say that she had gone to her room.’

‘Ah, was that it?’ returned Patricia contentedly. ‘I thought she was looking ill. So the new arrivals are really only General Cawthorne and his daughter,’ turning to re-

sume her interrupted conversation. ‘What a disappointment! He has such a hang-dog expression that I quite hoped he might turn out to be the hero of some criminal exploit. We are terribly in want of a sensation. Some one must positively sacrifice himself for the good of the rest and commit suicide!’

Meanwhile, in her room above, Eve was reading and re-reading Gilbert’s letter, line by line, sentence by sentence, and endeavouring to extract from it one syllable of hope, one word which might render the future less blank; but in vain. He had faithfully and loyally adhered to his determination; with a resolute and unwavering hand he had severed the connection between them, not even leaving her time for answer or remonstrance. And, as before, with the dull despair that is so often christened patience, she yielded, as she had ever done, to his will. It was over;

and the long future lay before her, unlightened and unrelieved, bearing in it only the melancholy hope to which the painter's last words had pointed. If life was a failure, was death—its opposite—success? To herself, as to him, she could only answer, 'Perhaps.'





CHAPTER IX.

ONE afternoon, about a month after the day when Eve had received Verschoyle's letter, two figures were walking along the road which leads from Nice towards Villafranca.

It was a day of brilliant sunshine, and was quite warm, in spite of the crisp freshness of the air. The sweet geraniums in full bloom, though it was mid-winter, scented the breeze, and the flowering shrubs, aloes and cactus, stood out in sharp relief against the deep blue of the sky, each leaf and blossom distinctly defined in the clear atmosphere.

Eve and Cyril Courtney—for it was he who

was her companion—had been walking in silence almost unbroken by a word from either. It was only when they had already left the town some way behind them that he spoke.

‘Shall we sit down?’ he asked. ‘It is not cold, and,’ glancing for a moment at her face, ‘you are tired.’

She neither assented nor dissented from his assertion, but seated herself on the spot he indicated, under a solitary fir-tree, which stood back a little way from the edge of the cliff.

Far below lay the sea, purple-blue, smooth, and shining. On the edge of the cliff, and here and there on its face, tufts of tall white heather lifted themselves; only the ripple of the water below broke the absolute stillness of the day. There had been a storm, and though it had gone off, leaving only a gentle swell behind, few boats were visible. Only

one white sail, far away, glided slowly over the water towards the horizon. Eve watched it absently, yet intently, till it had passed out of sight, and then moved and sighed with an indefinable sense of loss. Something living seemed to be gone, vanished; it had been the one touch of human life in the beautiful landscape, and now only the great silent world of nature lay before her, with its secrets that no man can read—like a page emblazoned with unknown characters, in which the prisoner tries in vain to decipher his sentence of death or his release. The fanciful imagination passed vaguely through her mind; nature seemed to her just then a distinct personality, guarding its secrets, dumb and jealous.

It was now, as has been said, a month since Eve had received Verschoyle's letter—a month since she had heard of him, save for the short bare accounts which had not failed to reach her of the new felony in which he

had been detected, of the accusation which had been brought against him, and of which, by his silence, and what was called his flight, he had admitted the justice. Only four weeks, and life had been going on ever since as if nothing had happened, and she knew not even where he was—what he was doing. If she could only have known, could have had but one word, one sign, she thought she could have been almost content—would at least have had courage to set to work to bear her trouble and to live it down. It was, above all else, the uncertainty, the terrible silence, almost like that of the grave, which was gradually threatening to break her down, and of which the history, written on her face, and in the stains which nights of sleeplessness were painting under her eyes, was causing Patricia at times a passing uneasiness, and from which, refusing to seek an interpretation, Cyril averted his eyes with a sullen impatience.

It was worse—so she dreamily thought, as, forgetting her companion, her eyes wandered over the sea—than the silence of the grave. The grave meant peace—rest, if it meant also silence. Were she dead, if she were conscious of anything, if it were anything but the ‘quiet of a dreamless sleep,’ she would surely know how it was with him ; if he were dead—but no—she broke off shuddering, with a passionate recoil from the thought—no, not that, anything but that, anything but death.

She did not blame him—her loyalty was still too absolute for that; but yet the thought crossed her mind, had he known how hard he had struck ? Had he foreseen how often she would scan the lines that he had sent her, in a vain endeavour to extract any comfort from them, any ray of hope ? She had answered him at once ; not begging for a reversal of his sentence, nor even asking him to reconsider it ; accepting his decision without a murmur

or an attempt to appeal against it; adding, however, the one entreaty that he would let her hear of him from time to time, that she might at least know what he was doing, where he was. But the letter had never been answered; he had, though she did not know it, left Sandmoor before it arrived, leaving no address, and she had heard nothing of him since.

‘If I only knew—if I only knew!’ the words were repeating themselves with a weary iteration in her mind, as she sat, with Cyril beside her, listening to the ripples breaking on the shore below.

He, for his part, was also gazing down at the stretch of water. He had taken off his hat, and the light fell full on his fair thin face and restless eyes. His brows were drawn together and knit. At last he spoke abruptly.

o to-morrow,’ he said.

Eve started, roused from her own thoughts.

‘To-morrow?’ she repeated. ‘Why to-morrow?’

‘Why should I stay?’ he said. ‘I——’

He broke off, pausing and plucking at the grasses which grew round. When he spoke again, it was in a different tone. They talked of her return home in a month; of Mrs. Ross’s marriage, which was to take place at Nortons; of Kit, who was to be left there for the present.

‘It is not that Ralston has any objection to him,’ Patricia had said, when asking her sister to take charge of her son. ‘He is so fond of duty in any shape, that I should not be the least surprised if he conceived an affection for the child as its embodiment. It is fortunate such people exist—it was always enough for anything to wear the garb of duty to make *me* dislike it. The very word was repulsive to me from a child; whereas I am

sure that if physic or the multiplication-table had only been offered me in the guise of a sinful pleasure, I should have taken to them at once. But I always considered it the worst taste on the part of a woman who marries again to be for ever reminding you of her first husband—they do it, you know, constantly. And Kit would really be worse; it would be like having a live memorial-card walking about. He is exactly like his father, too; he will be just as plain. The Rosses are really a type by themselves—men, women, and Rosses. If I am unnatural, I can't help it. Nature was very unnatural when she made him.'

Some of her sister's remarks Eve repeated to Cyril, half amused, half pitiful.

'He had better have been a street-arab, with some one to love him,' she observed. 'He is none the better off because he misses nothing. I used to blame her.'

‘ You do not now ?’

‘ No ; I think not. One learns indulgence, and also that love cannot be commanded, and that its absence is better than its counterfeit.’

‘ You think so ?’ he asked. ‘ I am not so certain. What does it matter that the coin is false, provided you don’t want to exchange it ? All you have to do is to avoid ringing it upon the counter.’

‘ And you think there would be satisfaction in the possession of what you are afraid to test ?’

‘ At any rate, it would be better than nothing, especially if you could succeed in believing in it. The art of self-deception is one of the most repaying that exist—half the happiness of the world comes from it. Strip life of its illusions, and you have nothing but an unsightly skeleton left.’

‘ Even if your theory is true,’ answered Eve, somewhat wistfully, ‘ after you have once

suspected them to be illusions, the bubble is burst—their *raison d'être* is gone.'

'It does not follow. You may see half through your own reasoning, and yet decide to be blind to its flaws. It is a process most of us are carrying on all our lives.' He paused, and went on in a bitter, yet half-jesting tone. 'Did I not tell you three days ago that, since you can give me no truer coin, I would take the counterfeit, and be thankful?'

She lifted her eyes, with a pained reproach in them, to him.

'You promised me——' she began.

'I know. I promised you to let that old story rest, and I am going to break my promise. What does the breaking of one promise more or less matter?'

There was a moody impatience in his voice. She turned and looked him in the face, replying rather to his tone than to his words.

‘I have broken no promise,’ she said, a little proudly.

‘Not as women count promises,’ he said with a sneer. ‘Can you say that you have never made me think that you cared for me—that——’

‘I did care for you,’ she answered, anger and old affection—the affection that had always made allowances for him and loved him, in spite of his faults—struggling for mastery in her voice. ‘I did care for you. You were my dearest friend.’

‘And he?’ the words forced their way abruptly, and, as it were, in spite of himself.

A sort of shiver passed over her as she caught them.

‘He?’ she repeated vaguely—‘he?’

‘Gilbert Verschoyle,’ he said roughly. ‘Did you love him—too?’

She had not heard his name for weeks. Never since Courtney had arrived had he

mentioned the man the thought of whom had, nevertheless, been a scarcely less constant presence to himself than to Eve herself, forcing itself upon him when he would most gladly have driven it away; and now that, almost against his will, he had at last put the question that should confirm or dispel his fears, he regretted it almost as soon as it had passed his lips. But it was too late; she had turned her eyes, open and wide, to meet his.

‘Oh, Cyril!’ she said, with a long, gasping breath; ‘yes—I loved him.’

It was the first time the confession had passed her lips, save to Gilbert himself. There was a silence. He had turned sharply away, and was staring before him. He had feared it—he now felt that, striven as he had against it, he had been sure of it for months; yet now that certainty had come it struck him like a blow, filling him besides with a fierce indignation. For a few moments

he was silent, then he spoke, catching his breath with sudden passion.

‘It is like a woman,’ he said. ‘A man is a fool who trusts to her. What are years of affection, what are implied pledges to her? no claim can be founded upon them. What are memories, however sacred? Some stranger comes across her and—God knows why—takes her fancy—so much the better if he is a man of bad character, respectability is dull and prosaic—and all are forgotten. Deny it if you can, if he had not crossed your path you would have married me. Tell me,’ he had laid his hands on her wrists—‘tell me if you can that it is not true.’

‘Perhaps,’ she answered; even now pain and pity—pity for the man whose weakness she had always known, and whom she had loved in spite of it—leaving no place in her for a personal resentment at his words. ‘It may be so; I cannot tell.’

Suddenly his mood changed. Stooping his head, he laid his brow against the hands he held, and spoke in low broken sentences.

‘Oh, Eve,’ he said, ‘marry me now! What does it matter? it is a wretched world, but let us make what we can of it. Give me the counterfeit since you can give me no more. I will be content. And at least—you have said it—you care for me too.’

‘I do,’ she said, ‘but not like that. I do love you, but he—was heaven and earth to me.’

Her low voice thrilled and faltered, but he caught the words and lifted his head, loosing her hands.

‘Heaven!’ he repeated bitterly; ‘heaven has little enough to do with him—the unconvicted felon, the base cowardly scoundrel who was not content with robbing his father, but——’

He stopped suddenly. She had raised her hand with a swift passionate gesture, the

softness had died out of her face, and a look that he had never seen there had flashed into her blue eyes.

‘Not another word!’ she said. ‘One more like those you have uttered now, and I will never willingly speak to you again. Remember this when you speak to me of Mr. Verschoyle’—even then as she spoke his name her voice changed—‘that the man whom you have slandered, of whom—in his absence and to the woman who loved him—you have dared to speak evil, is, whatever else he may be, the man whose name but for himself would have been my own—whose shame would have been mine too.’

‘But for himself?’ Cyril repeated, startled into momentary forgetfulness of the present.

‘Yes, but for himself. What was what the world calls his disgrace to me? What was it to me what he had done, knowing what he

was? But he was different. He loved me, thank God!’ again her voice broke and changed; ‘but men—you are right—are different from women.’

Her passion had died away, leaving her face white and still; as she ended her voice dropped. She was no longer looking at him, but once more away to the far horizon. Presently she went on.

‘It was he who put an end to it. We were engaged—he had let it be so at last. But when they accused him of—of that new thing, he wrote and said it must end.’

Again there was silence—a heavy silence, which at last he broke.

‘Forgive me, Eve!’ he said. ‘Your friendship is all I care for; you will not, at least, take that away, because of a few angry words. Life has gone hard with us both; forgive me!’

The pain—still half irritable, half com-

plaining—of his voice roused her. She had always been used to play the part to him of comforter, and even now she turned to him with a faint smile. His face was towards her—the thin lips a little unsteady; the spots of colour, brought by excitement, burning on the cheek-bones; the whole face worn and tremulous. She laid her hand in his.

‘Yes, Cyril,’ she said.

For a few minutes they sat thus in silence, then she rose.

‘It grows late,’ she said; ‘we must go back.’





CHAPTER X.

THAT afternoon Patricia was sitting alone writing letters in the drawing-room, when a card was brought in to her. She took it indifferently, although the advent of a visitor was always a welcome event to Mrs. Ross; but she started and coloured as she read the name inscribed upon it.

‘Is the gentleman waiting?’ she inquired.

‘He is,’ answered the woman. ‘He waits to know whether madame will receive him.’

Patricia hesitated before she answered.

‘Certainly,’ she said, after that momentary pause. ‘Show him in at once.’

A mirror hung over the chimney-piece, and she instinctively glanced towards it as she waited for her visitor, raising her hand as she did so to give a touch to the lace at her throat. She was a woman who, at any crisis of her destiny, however grave, would have been aware of it had a hair been out of its place. She had risen and stood in the middle of the room, conscious of her attitude, of the hand she had laid on the table, of the pose of her head, even of the background supplied by the bright little room, with its gay paper, and the row of flowering plants in the window—not a detail of the picture escaped her. And yet notwithstanding it all—and this she also noted with surprise and the sort of pleased interest which Patricia never failed to take in her inner phases of emotion, no less than in those which belonged to her outward personality—for once her perfect self-possession had failed her ; she observed, with the interest

belonging to an unwonted sensation, that her heart was beating fast, and her colour coming and going as the door opened, and Gilbert Verschoyle entered.

Why had he come? she was asking herself, had been asking herself ever since she had seen his name on the card—what could have brought him? She had forgotten Eve; the suspicions she had entertained as to an entanglement between her sister and the man to whom she herself had once been engaged were obliterated for the time as completely as if they had never existed; even Lord Ralston had faded from her memory as she stood waiting for the man whom she had once, according to her nature and in her own fashion, loved. As the past, abruptly, unexpectedly, recalled, rose up before her without as it were preface or introduction, a curious and sudden ripple of emotion lightly stirred her, quickening her pulses, and lending an

unwonted softness to her hazel eyes. But almost before Gilbert had entered, before either had spoken, the dream had vanished ; the past, like a slide in a magic-lantern superseded by another, had disappeared, and in its place the present stood before her. In Gilbert's face, even as she first caught sight of it, she had instinctively realized that the past found no reflection ; she knew, almost before she looked at him, that for him at that moment it did not exist.

He had the overwrought look of a man whose brain and nerves are in a state of tension, or upon whom some long-continued strain has begun to tell. His face produced, quiet though it was, the impression of suppressed excitement, and of self-control only maintained by a conscious and continuous effort. Patricia, looking at him, recognised with surprise the change which had taken place in him, the entire absence of the reckless care-

lessness, bordering upon insolence, which had been to her one of his most familiar features. Yet, recognising and realizing the change, Patricia knew also and at once that to whatever it was due, she had in it neither part nor lot. When she spoke she had entirely regained what self-possession she had lost.

‘You wished to see me?’ she said inquiringly.

He had not offered his hand, and had made no ordinary nor formal greeting. Patricia was aware of the omission, but she saw that he was not. His nerves were too highly strung, he was too much absorbed in what he had come to say to have thought to spare for the conventional usages of society.

‘I did,’ he said, answering her. ‘I have come for that.’

Again he paused. He was standing as if collecting his thoughts, and seeking for words to clothe them, not looking at Patricia, but

beyond her ; and she glanced towards him, surprised at his silence.

As she did so, a pang shot through her. Changed as he was, different from the companion with whom she had passed so many hours of familiar intercourse not, counting by weeks and months, so very long ago, who had made careless love to her in those pleasant bygone days—changed and worn as he was, she felt once more that he was the one man she had loved. In that moment Gilbert Verschoyle, little as he guessed it or would have cared had he known, had his revenge. It is true that as she had conquered she would conquer again ; even now no deliberate regret touched her for the part she had acted ; but yet she felt that the price she had paid was heavy. Ever afterwards she remembered him, not as he had been, but as he stood before her now, in that new world of his in which the past which they had shared was as if it had

never been, motionless, his head raised, his straight brows knit, and that curious overwrought look which was so new to her upon his face. She spoke softly, even a little tremulously.

‘Gilbert,’ she said—‘Gilbert, what do you want? what is it?’

He started and spoke with a visible effort.

‘I have come,’ he said—steady as his voice was, there was a sort of strain in it corresponding to the look on his face—‘I have come—to ask you a question.’

‘Ask what you will,’ she answered. It was as if she were speaking in a dream. His next words, however, dispelled it.

‘Your sister——’ he said, and then broke off.

‘My sister?’ she repeated, in a voice from which all the softness had died out. ‘It is of her that you wish to speak?’

‘Of her,’ he repeated, just glancing at her

with a sort of surprise. 'Who else?' He had forgotten that there could be any other question between them. The world is made up of such forgetfulness and of such memories. 'She has not told you?'

'She has told me nothing,' she said. Her moment of weakness was over, leaving nothing but resentment behind, deepening as he told his story, in few brief sentences, and to the end. She heard him, however, without interruption. Only when, having finished, he was silent, she spoke.

'One thing remains to be explained,' she said. 'You have forgotten to say what has brought you here.'

'I was coming to that,' he answered slowly. 'I came because, since that letter was written, there have been times when I have thought that it was possible I might have been wrong. Because there have been times when it has occurred to me that I may have acted the part

of a coward, that I have taken upon myself to do that which no man has a right to do—namely, to judge for another, and to say that the path, be it hard or easy, which that other had deliberately elected to tread was the wrong one.’

He paused. Hitherto he had been speaking slowly, in short sentences, as if recalling with effort a previous train of reasoning and speaking words upon which he had settled beforehand; but as he went on his manner altered.

‘Also,’ he said, ‘supposing—I only say supposing—that she had made no mistake, that she loved me as she imagined she did, would not the gain be sufficient to outweigh the sacrifice—to counterbalance the disapproval and blame of a world in arms? Have I any right, having—God knows how—won her love—I swear to Him I never meant to do it—have I any right, that misfortune

having befallen her, to shrink back from the consequences, to refuse to allow her to choose her good and evil for herself, and to shut her into what may after all be only an imaginary Eden, alone?’

He had spoken with increasing passion, his words no longer carefully chosen but hurrying and broken, as if he had forgotten his listener. Patricia’s answer came in contrast, with cold distinctness, touched with sarcasm.

‘It is late to speak of rights,’ she said, ‘and therefore I will not ask you if you had any *right* to take advantage of her position and of her ignorance, of her rash confidence in your innocence’—Gilbert moved and winced; it was—he knew it—the weak point in his defence, the fact that had haunted him with unavailing remorse, that he had not at once undeceived her; ‘I will not reproach you for the past, but this one thing I do require of you—it is surely not an exorbitant demand—

to act up to what even your own ideas of honour, before you tampered with them, prompted, as the only fair course to be pursued. To leave her alone, now, in peace, is all that remains to you to do, and I have a right to require that it shall be done.'

'That is your counsel,' he said. His vehemence was gone; he spoke in a low, dull tone; the fire which some transient hope had lent to his face had died out, as if a cloud which had been for a moment lifted from it had settled there again.

She bowed her head. 'I am sorry for you,' she said. It was not altogether false. Through her coldness and her resentment a ray of compassion shot, although her purpose never wavered.

'Tell me one thing first,' he said abruptly. 'It is not necessary that you should be sorry for me. My happiness—this at least I can say—has never weighed with me in the

balance, neither shall it do so now. But one question I, too, have a right to ask. Is *she* happy?’

For a moment Patricia hesitated. Apt in lying as she was, skilful in the art of self-deception which is so useful an ally to that of falsehood, as Eve’s face rose before her with the look upon it which it had worn of late, and of which she only now held the key and interpretation, the words with which she would have assured him of her sister’s happiness tripped upon her tongue. But her hesitation was over almost before he could have noticed it.

‘She will be happy,’ she said. ‘Give her time, which heals all wounds, and she will be happy.’

Gilbert looked at her fixedly. For the first time during their present interview, Mrs. Ross’s personality had suddenly become something more vivid to him than simply that of

the sister of the woman he loved. Hitherto, preoccupied as he had been by the one thought of Eve, Patricia had had no separate existence for him, no character that was not merged and fused in the particular office which he had now called upon her to fulfil—that, namely, of Eve's guardian and friend. Now, however, there rushed for the first time upon his memory the knowledge of the absolute untrustworthiness of the counsellor to whom, in default of others, he had turned for guidance. What was Patricia Ross—the woman who had lied to him and deceived him again and again, from whom at last he had forced the truth only, as it were, at the point of the bayonet—what was she that he should believe her in a matter of such moment ; what were her assertions worth that he should give them credit? And yet to whom else could he turn?

He was still gazing at her with the painful

perplexity born of his doubt and his distrust legibly written in his face, when Patricia, receiving no reply, turned and read it. It was characteristic of her that the perception that he did not believe her, whilst it complicated the situation, roused no additional animosity in her mind. She would, on the contrary, rather have despised him, had he given credit to her unsupported word.

‘She will be happy,’ she had said.

‘Is that the truth?’ he asked at last slowly, still scanning her face, as if by that means to discover the truth or falsity of her assertion.

‘What reason have I to believe you?’

It was the first reference to the past that he had made, the first indication he had given that he remembered it, and it was curious that the implied accusation sent a thrill of tardy repentance to her heart.

‘None, I confess it,’ she said. ‘Gilbert, I am sorry. It is all over—over and forgotten

now; but I should like to know that I have your forgiveness.'

He looked at her with eyes that were surprised, yet only half comprehending, as if he had no thought to spare from the present.

'Forgiveness?' he repeated. 'Forgiveness, yes. What does it matter now? It is easy to forgive where no harm was done. It is, as you say, over and forgotten. Only speak the truth now. Is she happy?'

A flush had risen to her face at the careless, half-contemptuous indifference of his reply, then suddenly a gleam of triumph lit it. She rose.

'Look!' she said.

The room in which their interview was taking place looked out upon a garden stretching a little way behind the house, and of which Patricia, sitting facing the window, commanded the view, whilst Verschoye's back had been turned to it. Now, however,

he too had risen, glancing in the direction she indicated. There, along the pathway, Eve and Cyril Courtney were slowly walking towards the house. Gilbert stood motionless, looking at the two. Eve had stopped to gather a flower, and as he watched he saw her companion take it from her hand. Then his eyes, with a dumb passionate question in them, sought Patricia's. She answered it.

'She will be happy,' she murmured. 'The mischief you have done is not irreparable. You are not,' quoting the words he had used a few minutes before, 'shutting her into Eden—alone.'

There was no answer. Gilbert had turned without word or farewell; she heard the door close on him, and he was gone.

She gave a low laugh as she dropped again into her chair.

'A satisfactory conclusion,' she said, 'and not without dramatic effect. I could not have

done it better if I had had the arrangement of it myself; it was most complete. I doubt whether I could have satisfied him without it; he did not seem prepared to give my assertions unlimited credit. And after all it was the truth—she will be happy. The days for deathless attachments and unalterable fidelity are—if they ever existed, and notwithstanding the faith in them that Mr. Gilbert Verschoyle appears to have developed with somewhat startling suddenness—over.'





CHAPTER XI.

ONE November afternoon, about two years after that upon which Gilbert Verschoyle had paid his visit to Mrs. Ross, Mr. Erskine was walking down Piccadilly at the pace natural to a man who has come to town resolved to accomplish in two days what might have been fairly considered to be the work of ten. The weather, it is true, was not provocative of loitering; a drizzling rain fell, whilst a yellow fog made the opposite side of the street indistinct and vague.

Mr. Erskine was hurrying along, glancing neither to right nor left, when he suddenly

stopped short with a smothered exclamation, turning to look after a man who, with his collar turned up and his hat over his eyes, had just gone by in the opposite direction. An ejaculation escaped the clergyman's lips.

'Verschoyle,' he muttered to himself. He hesitated a moment, then turning, overtook the figure which had arrested his attention.

'I beg your pardon,' he said hastily, as he caught him up. 'But I cannot, surely, be mistaken—Verschoyle?'

He ended with less assurance than he had begun. The other had turned, and as he caught a fuller view of his face, he felt a moment's uncertainty as to whether the height and general air of the man had not led him into accosting a stranger. At no time had any real intimacy existed between himself and Gilbert Verschoyle, and glancing at the man before him, he felt bewildered and confused,

and colouring furiously, had almost begun an apology, when the other spoke.

‘Erskine,’ he said, ‘it is you? I did not recognise you as you passed. Are you staying in London?’

A flash of unmistakable annoyance had passed over his features, but he spoke civilly if without cordiality.

‘Only for two days,’ answered the other. ‘I am glad to have met you.’

Though reassured as to Verschoyle’s identity, he still felt some embarrassment, which Gilbert’s manner was not calculated to remove. After the exchange of a few more words the latter moved.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘but you will agree that the weather is unfavourable for conversation, and ’—as he was cut short by a cough—‘I have a cold. I am afraid I must be going on.’

He held out his hand. Erskine, however,

who had been observing him closely, disregarded the dismissal.

‘You have been ill,’ he said. The words were rather an assertion than a question—indeed, a casual glance at Gilbert’s face would have made the fact evident—the change was sufficient to account for Erskine’s momentary uncertainty as to his identity. He answered with visible impatience.

‘Yes—a cold, as I said. I beg your pardon, but I am in a hurry. Good-bye.’ Again he held out his hand, but still the other did not take it.

‘Where are you staying?’ he asked. ‘You will let me come and see you?’

Gilbert was becoming irritated at his persistence. He paused, and when he answered, it was with brief decision.

‘Does it not occur to you,’ he said, ‘that that question had better not have been asked? Since I am safe in assuming you to be aware of the circumstances of my case, you will

understand me if I say that I prefer *not* to give you my address.'

He had looked him steadily over as he answered. Erskine, for his part, was struggling with constitutional shyness, coupled with an extreme reluctance to appear to meddle or to force himself into the private concerns of another; whilst yet he felt that there was something which must be said, and that, should he let the present opportunity slip, he might never have a second. At last he spoke abruptly.

'You say I am aware of the circumstances of your case. Are you sure that you are aware of them yourself? Have any communications from Sandmoor—from Sir Cyril Courtney—reached you since you left?'

He had kept his eyes upon Gilbert, and noticed the slight involuntary hardening of his face at the mention of Courtney's name.

'None,' he answered. 'Have you any in-

formation to offer—of births, marriages, or deaths?’

‘I *have* something to tell you,’ said Erskine, ‘if it is possible you have remained ignorant of it all this time. But surely it is not possible; you must have heard, though you have seen fit to take no notice of the fact—you must have heard that Jenkinson, your servant, has confessed to having destroyed Mr. Verschoyle’s will. You were cleared before you had left Sandmoor three months.’

He had spoken rapidly, with his eyes turned away, but he glanced towards Gilbert as he ended. The blood had rushed to his face, and was gone almost as quickly, leaving it absolutely colourless. Erskine noticed that he drew his breath hard.

‘You had not heard it?’ he exclaimed.

‘I had not. Why——’

‘Every effort was made to find you,’ said Erskine, anticipating the hasty question which

had sprung to Gilbert's lips, 'but in vain. Still, it was thought that through the newspapers—advertisements were inserted—it was almost impossible that you should not have been reached.'

'And so it was Jenkinson?' said Gilbert slowly, as if taking in the facts with effort. 'He burnt it? Yes, he was there, of course. I remember.'

'He burnt it. He imagined that he would thus secure the property to you. When, however, he saw the turn matters had taken, he went to Sir Cyril Courtney—he was one of the trustees, you know, under the will which was destroyed—and cleared you.'

He stopped. Gilbert never spoke. After a moment Erskine went on.

'You should not have gone,' he said. 'You should have waited; the truth always wins in the end.'

Again he stopped. Gilbert had scarcely

heard or understood him. One fact only was palpable to him—that he was cleared, that the accusation which had driven him away had been proved false ; one thought only was present to his mind—Eve Carrington. ‘ Every effort was made to find you, but in vain.’ With a flash of keen sharp realization, which wrung his heart like physical pain, he imagined her waiting, waiting in vain. Whatever might have come after, he knew she would not have given him up at once, and how long had she waited and hoped ? At last he was conscious that Erskine was again speaking, and roused himself to listen.

‘ Where have you been?’ he said. ‘ How was it possible, in these days, to hide yourself so effectually?’

‘ I went abroad first,’ he said. ‘ Since then I have been travelling, in America and elsewhere. I only came to England last week.’

‘ And now you will give me your address ?’

said Erskine. 'You will let me come and see you?'

Gilbert assented mechanically, giving the name and number of the street in which he was lodging.

'Come if you like,' he said. 'I shall be in to-night.' He had already turned away, when he spoke again, in a curious low tone. 'Is Sir Cyril Courtney married?' he asked.

'Sir Cyril—no,' answered Erskine, surprised. He was aware that the two had not been upon friendly terms, and was at a loss to account for the interest indicated by the question. 'Had you heard that——' But Gilbert was already gone.

* * * * *

Mr. Erskine did not fail to avail himself of Gilbert's permission to visit him that evening. At nine o'clock he was shown into the lodgings that he was at present occupying, and which, though dingy and unattractive, were

not uncomfortable. One or two French novels and a newspaper lay together on the table, and a terrier rose and snarled as Erskine entered. It was of the dog that the latter spoke on his entrance, seizing upon the first unembarrassing subject of conversation.

‘You have not got Ben still?’ he asked.
‘Is this his successor?’

Gilbert’s brow clouded.

‘I left him behind,’ he said. He did not add that so far as it had been possible he had taken with him nothing which should serve as a reminder of the past from which he was severing himself, as he thought, for ever.

He had received his visitor much as he had been accustomed to do at Sandmoor, with the indifference that is natural to a man who has lost the habit of friendship, and who had, besides, little in common with his guest. He had always tolerated rather than liked Mr. Erskine, whilst yet he had been at

times half won by the simple kindliness of the young man to a corresponding cordiality.

Half an hour—three-quarters—had passed, and though they were still sitting together, and Erskine showed as yet no signs of taking leave, the talk had never penetrated below the surface. They had discussed public affairs, recent events, even literature; and then Gilbert had put some questions, only half listening to the answers, about his sister and the neighbourhood, and had heard that Dorothy had been living, since his departure, at Mace, in the charge of Lady Courtney. At last, however, he spoke with a shade of difference in his voice, his eyes upon the ground.

‘I saw Lady Ralston’s marriage in the newspapers,’ he said.

‘Ah, yes—that was nearly two years ago,’ answered Mr. Erskine. ‘She is staying now, with her baby, at her sister’s.’

Gilbert knocked the ashes from his cigar—his hand shook a little—before he answered.

‘Her sister’s?’ he said inquiringly.

‘Miss Carrington. Did you not know it?—they are half-sisters.’

Gilbert’s face never changed. His eyes were still bent on the floor.

‘Yes, I know,’ he said. A moment later he spoke on a different subject.

Of himself—his past, his future—he said no word, never so much as touching upon the communication, important as it was, which had been made to him that afternoon. Erskine, for his part, though he had followed his host’s lead in conversation, and resisted the inclination to bring it round to more personal matters, felt vaguely uneasy. Now that he was in a position to make his observations at leisure, he was more struck than before by the alteration in Verschöyle’s appearance. It was one, however, which was

not altogether painful. Worn and wasted as he was, it almost seemed to the observer that he looked younger than when he saw him last, and that his expression had lost much of the hard recklessness which had constituted such a prominent characteristic of it formerly, returning to something more like what it might be supposed to have been before his quarrel and struggle with the world had set its stamp upon his features.

At last, gathering up his courage, and quitting the general topics they had been discussing with somewhat languid interest upon both sides, Mr. Erskine ventured to put a direct personal question.

‘And so you have passed the last two years abroad?’ he said.

‘Abroad. As I told you, I only returned to England ten days ago. I was always a vagabond.’

‘And you have been ill?’

‘Yes,’ rather curtly; ‘I have been ill. Will you have another cigar?’

Erskine accepted the offer, declining, however, now that he was fairly launched, to be turned from his investigations by Verschoyle’s evident impatience.

‘Have you been ill long?’ he asked. ‘What is the matter?’

‘Some months.’

Gilbert spoke with even more brevity than before. Erskine, however, persisted.

‘Have you seen a doctor?’ he asked.

‘What, you are really bent upon going on?’ said Gilbert, giving in, however, at last, and apparently resigning himself to his guest’s cross-examination. ‘Yes; I saw one a fortnight ago.’

‘And he——’

‘Sent me to England. I was in the south of France.’

Verschoyle spoke with a peculiar smile.

‘At this time of year? He must have been mad. May I ask whether he also recommended your walking about in the streets in such weather as this?’

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders; then, apparently changing his mind, he spoke in a slightly different tone.

‘Look here, Erskine,’ he said, ‘I do not know why you take such an interest in my concerns. It is very good of you—especially as I can scarcely now claim to be considered as one of your parishioners—though you will excuse me for saying that I think, all the same, I could have done as well without it. Since, however, you seem to want the truth, you shall have it—in confidence, of course. The doctor I saw told me that in all human probability I was done for.’

Erskine recoiled with a start.

‘What do you mean?’ he exclaimed.

‘Done for—dying. I thought so myself—

he only corroborated my own impressions. It is heart and lungs. My mother, you know, died of consumption at twenty-eight.'

'And if it was so—if he was right—why were you so mad as to return to London in November?' Erskine spoke almost angrily. 'Are you bent upon killing yourself?'

'No; certainly not. Nature, besides, has kindly taken the matter into her hands, and saved me the trouble of even considering the question. As for my reasons for coming back to England, I came because I thought I should like to make an end of it here—it was simply a fancy I had. It could make very little difference—the doctor himself allowed that.'

He was speaking with an absent smile; and Erskine, looking at him, perceived the change which he had already noticed, marked and emphasized. He did not doubt the truth of what Verschoyle had told him—it was written in letters too legible for that; and in it

he also read the interpretation of what had before perplexed him. Instinctively he felt that it was death's shadow which, passing over his face, had smoothed away its bitterness, and already begun to heal his quarrel with life. He gazed at him for a few moments, agitated and moved ; then the habit of his profession reasserted itself.

‘Verschoyle,’ he said, faltering, ‘if this is true—if you are, as you say, dying, have you thought what it is?’

Gilbert turned his eyes upon him with a curious expression in them ; it was almost as if he were faintly amused by the question. It seemed, indeed, a strange one to be asked of him to whom the answer was of an importance so infinitely more pressing than to the questioner—as if some one miles off had asked of a man living in a powder-mill whether he had taken into account the match which he knew was set to explode it.

‘I have thought of it,’ he answered. ‘It is ceasing to live—that is the definition which commends itself to me.’

‘It is more than that,’ said Mr. Erskine. He would have given worlds, poor fellow, for the right to be silent. He was no priest by nature—he felt no power nor strength to win the sinner to repentance, and save his soul alive; but just as a man of honour, made a soldier against his will, and with no warlike vocation, stands to his guns in the day of battle, so he spoke now in the discharge of what he took to be his duty. ‘It means more than ceasing to live. It means death, and after that the judgment.’

He spoke blunderingly, abruptly, as was natural to a man fulfilling an office which was most distasteful, and for which he felt himself eminently unfitted; yet there was a certain urgency in his appeal. Gilbert was still looking at him, smiling and unoffended, perhaps

recognising his difficulty, and pitying him for it. When he answered, it was only with a quotation.

‘“Let me fall now into the hand of the Lord; and let me not fall into the hand of man.” David and I,’ added Gilbert Verschoyle, speaking half to himself, ‘are agreed.’

There was a short silence, and when he spoke again he had dismissed the subject, quietly but decidedly. He was visibly tired, and soon after Erskine rose to take leave.

‘And what shall you do?’ he asked. ‘Surely, now, you will come back?’

He paused suddenly, remembering that Sandmoor was let, and in the hands of strangers, and that Gilbert had now no home. If the latter was conscious of his embarrassment he took no notice of it.

‘I do not know what my plans will be,’ he said quietly. ‘I am sure I need not ask you not to mention to my sister or—others, that

you have seen me—yet I should like your promise.’

Erskine hesitated.

‘Think better of it,’ he said. ‘At least your sister has a right to know that——’

‘That is my affair,’ answered Gilbert, interrupting him rather shortly. ‘Have I your promise—neither to speak of me nor of my illness?’

There was no help for it. Erskine yielded reluctantly, and giving the required pledge, took his leave.

Left alone, Gilbert leant back in his chair and pondered. So he had been cleared. He stood, as regarded his character, as he had stood when he had yielded to Eve’s fearless devotion and had let it win the day. Had he been patient—so he thought now dreamily, pain dulled by physical exhaustion—had he been patient, had he possessed her faith, they would have been together now, fighting the

battle side by side, hand in hand, in which she had entreated him to let her have a part, defeated or victorious together. And instead, what was the history of the last two years? He knew his own, but what of hers? He knew now, as he had at times suspected from the first, in spite of himself, in spite of his last interview with Patricia, that she had been faithful to him; and such being the case, what should he say of himself? Was it that he had failed her, forsaken her, swayed by a fear no less cowardly because it was not for himself? Yet how vain and purposeless was such questioning now! He was cleared, it was true, but deliverance had come too late; the wrong, if wrong it had been, was done. He too, little as he had suspected it at the time or since, except in occasional flashes such as that which had led him to seek Patricia, had fallen down and worshipped the image—the idol of conventional honour—that

Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up ; he had allowed the shawms and cymbals of the world to drown the other voices—even Eve's own ; but it was done, irrevocable.

Erskine's words rang in his ears—' Every effort was made to find you, but in vain.' How long had she waited, how long had she hoped ? And now it was too late—too late.

And yet, granted that he had been wrong, was it not better so ? had not good, as sometimes happens, come out of evil ? What had he, at best, had to give that she would not have been the worse for receiving ? had not the accusation, false though it had been, come in time to save her ? A little dialogue that he had chanced to overhear one day, and which at the time had struck him with a significance never intended by the speakers, recurred to his mind. ' A stain,' some one had said, ' can be removed.' He had caught the answer, ' But oftenest the colour goes too.'

What had been left in his life worthy of her acceptance?

At last, as the clock struck one, he rose wearily.

‘At any rate, it is one of the things which are beyond recall. It is taken out of our hands.’





CHAPTER XII.

THE day after Mr. Erskine's visit Gilbert was taken seriously ill. It might have been the result of the exposure to weather the day before, or perhaps of unwonted excitement, or of the two together ; but for some days he was completely prostrated, and was forced for the first time to submit to regular medical attendance and care. The doctor who was called in to see him was a clever, busy, matter-of-fact man, in whom his present patient excited no particular interest. He was clearly dying, and though it was his business to protract the process as much as possible, the case did not

hold the same interest for him as if the end had not been predetermined. He visited and did his best for him, and naturally formed his own conclusions; but he was not a man who mentioned such conclusions unless asked to do so, and as Gilbert put no question as to his condition, he was silent.

The landlady, who, also busy, nevertheless spared time from her avocations to bestow some casual pity upon her lodger and his unfriended condition, was inclined to be more expansive, but she met with little encouragement.

‘Is there no one you would wish sent for, sir?’ she asked him one day half curiously, half sympathetically. ‘My lad Jim’s a good scholar. He could write any letters for you. Is there nobody you would like to come and see you?’

‘No one,’ answered Gilbert laconically, comprehending both her question and the

meaning underlying it. 'If I should die,' he added a moment after, indicating a despatch-box on the table, 'my directions will be found there.'

'Lor, sir, you're not going to die!' said Mrs. Freshfield cheerfully, in the perfunctory manner in which it is common to answer an invalid in whom no particular interest is felt. Gilbert made no reply. He himself thought it unlikely, at least for the present, but he had no wish to enter upon a discussion of his chances with his landlady. The latter, for her part, as she left the room, felt a slight diminution of interest in her lodger, which was perhaps not unnatural. She was a kind woman, and would not have objected to have had her sympathies drawn out had Gilbert shown the slightest desire for them; but as it was, she felt thrown back upon herself and rebuffed, and was disposed to let him alone for the future, except as regarded his physical

wants—which was, indeed, what he would most have desired.

As he lay alone, hour after hour, too weak for reading or for long consecutive thought, he felt no need of sympathy. He had never been used to it, and he did not want it. In those nights and days of pain and silence a resolution was slowly and surely taking form within him, shaping itself out of the past, lighted up as it had been by Mr. Erskine's information. Whether he had, as regarded that past, done right or wrong; whether he had, as he had persuaded himself at the time, saved the woman who loved him from an evil destiny; or whether he had done her one of the greatest wrongs a man can do a woman—had won her love and left her—this question he did not seek to decide. If it forced itself upon him from time to time, he put it resolutely aside with a determination born partly of an instinctive sense that in his

present condition it was one into which he would do well not to look too closely, partly of the reluctance which was natural to him to discuss a question which was already unalterably settled, whether for good or evil. It was not with the past that he had to do now, but with the brief future which was all that lay before him; and with regard to that future, lying for hours silent, his brows drawn together in anxious thought, he was arriving at a determination.

He would see Eve once more. Right or wrong, he had left her; right or wrong, he would see her again. If it was with her as Erskine's words had unconsciously implied, if she had been too true, her loyalty too unfaltering, to find the consolation he had laboriously taught himself to believe she would have found, then it could do her no harm to see him once more; and for himself——

‘I must go,’ he said, half aloud. ‘Right or

wrong, I must go. If I am to die, I must see her once more.'

He recovered to a certain extent. By the first week of December—about a fortnight, that is, after Mr. Erskine's visit—he had regained sufficient strength to resume, in some degree at least, his ordinary habits; and he felt that if his determination was to be carried out, the sooner it was done the better.

One afternoon, accordingly, he informed Mrs. Freshfield, to her undisguised astonishment, that he was leaving London the next day, paying no attention to her remonstrances and the representations she thought it her duty to make to him as to his imprudence in attempting as yet to move.

'You are very good,' he said, half smiling, as he cut her short; 'but I do not think that delay would mend matters.'

The day upon which he had settled for his journey was fine, though a sharp frost had set

in the week before, and the air was keen and cold. He got into an empty carriage, having taken his ticket for King's Semple, the nearest station to Nortons. He was going there ; as to further plans or prospects, his mind was a blank. During the last few weeks one idea had so entirely possessed him to the exclusion of all others—that, namely, of seeing Eve Carington once more—and he had been so uncertain as to the chances of its accomplishment, that now that he was actually on his way to carry it out, his horizon seemed bounded by its fulfilment ; he saw, tried to see, nothing beyond.

At a station some miles from London, another passenger got into the carriage which Gilbert had hitherto had to himself ; a fresh-coloured country lad of perhaps nineteen or twenty, bright-faced and healthy, with strong, sunburnt hands and clear blue eyes. He had a fox-terrier with him, which he introduced

into the carriage with a word and laugh to the guard, to whom he was evidently well known, and a courteous apology to its occupant.

Gilbert only bowed; he could not have spoken. Suddenly and unexpectedly, with the boy's entrance, a strange transformation had taken place in him. Five minutes ago he had been almost recklessly indifferent as to all that had not to do with his present errand. He knew that he was dying, he had felt so certain of it that he had not even cared to question the London doctor by whom he had been attended; but hitherto he had accepted the fact as a matter of course, as, so to speak, a settled question. It had, indeed, scarcely cost him a conscious effort to do so. He had never feared death, nor had any undue clinging to life; when, as had once or twice been the case, opportunity had offered, he had never hesitated to brave the one and to risk

the other with rash foolhardiness. Since his illness he had never deceived himself, nor indulged in the sanguine expectations of recovery so common among those attacked by his disease ; he had, as he had told Mr. Erskine, known that he was dying, and had accepted his doom manfully and without a complaint. Yet now, suddenly, with strange unexpectedness, fear of death had taken possession of him, sprung upon him 'like an armed man.' As his eyes fell, carelessly at first, upon the boy, noting his perfect health, his strong and joyous vitality, for the first time a longing woke in him, fierce and sickening, for the same ; for the first time he turned, with a desperate recoil, from the thought of the enemy who was gaining upon him with swift and steady footsteps.

Physical courage, whatever may be asserted to the contrary, belongs to the lowest as well as to the highest organisms ; nay, more cer-

tainly to the former than to the latter. To the brute and to the savage alike it comes by nature, both from the unsensitive bluntness of their nerves, and because the imagination which lends half its horrors to death is wanting; whilst in the case of higher and more delicate organizations, it comes only because will or duty dominates fear. There is no true courage in the fearless; the highest type of it has to be won through the gateway of terror. To Gilbert had come one of those hours which, as has been said before, may give the lie to a lifetime, and make the brave man a coward. A horror of great darkness had suddenly overtaken him, paralyzing his senses; he was afraid. Death, death! Was it possible that he was being borne blindly, unresistingly, towards it; was nearing it with every breath that he drew, as surely as that the train was bearing him westward. A positive horror took possession of him, numbing

his faculties, catching at his breath, turning him sick and cold.

It was a terror that was purely physical, that had nothing to do with things spiritual, with repentance for the past or with fear for the future, with the thought of God or of judgment to come; neither was he at that moment concerned with the details of the life he was leaving. It was life, simple life, life on any terms, to which he was clinging with a desperate tenacity; to life itself, apart from what it gives. To Gilbert, just then, simple vitality, whatever might be its accompaniments, its pains, its disappointments, was the one thing desirable, the only thing worth having. It seemed to him, in the half-delirium of that terrible moment, as if its conditions, its accidents, were as immaterial compared to the thing itself as the nature of the food he receives to a man dying of starvation. To live, to breathe, to be, not in some strange

and spiritual region, but in this common everyday world, to which he was accustomed, which was his home—that was what he wanted ; to have life before him like the boy opposite who was whistling under his breath as he played with his dog.

Had he been a woman he would have wept, would probably have prayed and entreated Heaven to work a miracle in his behalf. Being a man, he clenched his hands and set his teeth, and wearied God with no supplications which he knew to be vain. There was nothing to be done to avert the doom that was coming upon him, and he knew it ; what George Sand has called *l'agonie du repos* was laid upon him ; he could not struggle, like the drowning swimmer, for life ; neither could he fight like the soldier ; he had simply to wait, like the condemned criminal, till the sentence should be carried into effect. Death seemed to him at that moment like a personal enemy

who held him in his clutches ; not, indeed, one open and visible, with whom he could have wrestled and fought, but a stealthy foe armed to the teeth and stealing upon him in the darkness, helpless and bound.

He looked out of the window. The train was rushing through country every landmark of which had been familiar to him from boyhood ; he remembered the very sensations with which he had been accustomed to watch the landscape fly past as he returned home for the holidays ; he felt, by one of those vivid realistic flashes of memory which everyone has experienced, the blood bounding in his veins with anticipation of the keen delight which the liberty of even his unsympathetic home afforded ; he recollected the names, the very look of the stations which they were passing, the trimly kept gardens, the creepers on the walls. Was it possible that he was seeing them for the last time, that he, Gilbert Verschoyle,

the boy of whom he was thinking, who had never known a day's illness, was dying? He felt stifled and oppressed; his breath came with difficulty, and leaning forward he put out his hand to open the window.

For a moment he failed in his attempt to lower the glass; it was stiff, and his fingers—he noticed it with a dull surprise—were shaking. He stretched out his other hand. The movement attracted the attention of the lad opposite, and he looked up from his dog.

‘Do you want the window open?’ he asked in his pleasant young voice, forcing it down with his strong fingers without a moment's difficulty. ‘Are you sure you are wise?—it is bitterly cold.’

He had cast a kindly glance at his companion. Both the action and the question struck Gilbert, in his present mood, like a blow.

‘Thank you,’ he answered mechanically.
‘I do not feel it.’

The keen frosty air blew in his face, reviving and bracing him. He drew a deep breath like a man wakening from a terrible dream, who, though still confused and bewildered, finds himself once more at liberty to speak and move. He shook himself mentally, and looked round. What had he been feeling—what was the meaning of it? Was it fear? was it—the word suggested itself involuntarily—was it cowardice? As the numbing and paralyzing sensation which had oppressed him began to pass off, it was succeeded by one scarcely less painful—by a sharp sense of shame and a bitter humiliation. Was it possible, he asked himself half incredulously, that he who, had he thought about it at all, would no more have dreamt of priding himself upon his courage than upon any other natural and inalienable attribute of his man-

hood—was it possible that he had been the victim of a degrading cowardice, of an unmanly fear of death? Steadily he looked the facts in the face and set himself to grapple with them, neither denying them nor seeking to excuse himself.

The train was already approaching the station at which he was to stop, but before it was reached the struggle was over—he had conquered; that short fierce paroxysm of terror was left behind, crushed down, become a thing of the past. He still felt dizzy and exhausted, no change had taken place in his state or his expectations; but his courage, his nerve, had returned—he was ready to face what was to come.

He leant back in his corner, unconscious or heedless of the bitter wind blowing in upon him. He did not know that his fellow-traveller, who had transferred his attention from the fox-terrier to himself, was regarding

him with covert interest; nor that physical exhaustion, coupled with the lassitude consequent on a supreme mental crisis lived through and conquered, had left upon his face, worn as it was, a spiritual repose foreign to its usual character, and which even attracted the curiosity of the lad. Suffering is not without its own spiritualizing power; it is not only the Stephens of the church whose faces, amid the stones of their martyrdom, are as those of angels.

It was already four when he got out at the station which was his destination, and the short winter's day was fast closing in. He nodded to the boy, who had bent forward to open the door, and now looked after him compassionately.

‘Dying—poor chap!’ he observed to himself, before returning to his more cheerful meditations. ‘It is hard luck—such a good-looking fellow, too.’

Meanwhile, having left the platform, Gilbert stood looking round. There was no cab in attendance, nor any chance—so the solitary porter the station boasted assured him—of his procuring any sort of conveyance, unless he were willing to wait for a considerable and indefinite time. For a moment he hesitated, inquiring the distance to Nortons, which, as it happened, he had never approached from this direction; then he made up his mind.

‘A mile and a half, is it?’ he said. ‘Thanks; I will walk.’

He turned away, and set off at once. It was intensely cold. Here in the country there had been a very slight fall of snow, which lay like thin hoar-frost on the bare hedges and leafless branches; far above in the darkening blue of the cloudless sky a crescent moon shone faintly out. The air as he breathed it caught his breath; underneath his feet the ground was as hard as iron, except

where here and there a thin coating of ice crackled beneath his tread. Before he had walked three-quarters of a mile, he began to wonder whether he had not miscalculated his strength, whether he would succeed in reaching Nortons on foot. Yet it was only a month since he had been in the constant habit of walking twice the distance with ease. His breath came with ever-increasing difficulty, laboured and panting. As the twilight deepened, and moonlight gradually replaced the lingering daylight, it dazzled his eyes; and more than once he missed his footing, and stumbled on the rough rutty road. From time to time he stood still and took breath before again pressing on. Another half-mile had been traversed—he must be nearly there . . . the road was straight, he could not miss it, so the porter had said . . . Could he hold on . . . was it much farther? Again he stopped to gather strength, looking round.

Yes; he knew where he was now—a few more yards and he would have gained the lower gate . . . he would be there in another five minutes . . . if only it were not so desperately, cruelly cold . . . if he could get his breath. When he reached the gate he would rest.

He had reached it. He stood at the foot of the hill, half-way up which Nortons was built; already he could dimly distinguish the lights in the windows. Stumbling forward with a last effort, he leant his arms upon the upper bar of the gate. A new fear, a new mis-giving, had laid hold of him now that he was so near the accomplishment of his purpose, though, like everything else, in the mist of exhaustion which was creeping over his brain, it was vague and incoherent. Should he find her there—he was confusedly questioning—was she true to him if she were there? Erskine had said—no, he could not remember

what Erskine had said—some one had said she was to marry Courtney. Two years since he had seen her—two years since their parting—or was it yesterday? What had she said? ‘After God, you’—those were her words . . . What had they meant? he could not remember . . . Was she close to him now—standing just out of sight—he could not see, it was growing so dark! A kind of drowsy bewilderment was stealing over him. For a moment his head fell forward on his folded arms, and his eyes closed.

It was just then that a little whispering breeze got up. It crept in among the trees, and stirred some laurel-bushes that stood near, so that the thin coating of snow, which covered their smooth flat leaves, slid off with a rustling sound; and it blew in Gilbert’s face, cutting like a knife, and rousing him from the stupor into which he was falling.

He raised his head, and looked blankly

before him. Had he been asleep—here, out of doors—in the dusk of the evening? Where was he? Then, suddenly, his brain cleared; he remembered where he was—why he had come. He could scarcely breathe. For a moment as he stood clutching for support at the wood of the gate and gasping for breath; it seemed to him that death was coming upon him there — then; another minute and the acute agony of the breathlessness was over, and, rallying his strength, he had pushed open the gate and passed in.

* * * * *





CHAPTER XIII.

THERE was a musical party at Nortons that afternoon. It was a somewhat unusual event, and due both to the presence of Lady Ralston there, and to the fact that any form of society, of howsoever uncongenial a type, was preferable in her eyes to none. She had, therefore, suggested to her sister the advisability of inviting her neighbours to the house.

‘You do nothing in the way of society, Eve,’ she had said. ‘There are duties which everyone owes to the neighbourhood in which they live, however dull it may be.’

Eve had assented to the proposal without

difficulty. She had, indeed, in these days become very acquiescent. It had ever been her habit to be passive rather than active, and the feature had become more marked of late, to be slow in asserting her will on trivial or indifferent matters, and now it seemed that there were few which were not indifferent to her.

The two years which had elapsed since she had parted from Gilbert had worked little outward change in Eve Carrington. She was still characterized by the same somewhat faint and shadowy beauty, by the same still and quiet grace. If her manner had become a shade colder than of old, it had not lost its gentle courtesy ; if her eyes and the lines of her mouth indicated a deeper sadness than that already stamped there by her early sorrow, it was one that sought and found no other language and expression. Ever unaccustomed to claim or desire sympathy,

she would have shrunk from it now as from a touch upon an open wound; and had it been otherwise, it is for the most part those who but half believe what they profess who are eager to proclaim the melancholy secrets life has taught them. Those to whom 'sorrow's creed' has become by experience the profound and governing reality by which their views of life are shaped and coloured, are not impatient to make proselytes. She was not bitter, nor proud, nor repellent; she simply stood apart, separated from the hurrying cheerful world by an intangible yet impassable barrier, which few had courage, even if they did not lack the inclination, to try to surmount.

Since gradually, after months of patient and vain hoping against hope, of watching and looking for tidings which never came, she had finally given up hope of Gilbert's return, she had, as it were, stood aside from life and

let it pass her by. If it still held its joys and its sorrows for her, its hopes and fears, she stood a little above and beyond them all—its fangs, so to speak, had been drawn; she had viewed it with the quiet quasi-indifference of one who believes, rightly or wrongly, that it has done its worst for her. She had not rebelled; she had rather learnt patience and courage, but they were the courage and the patience that spring from the grave of hope.

Life was still full to her of mysteries—as full as when, even then with a mournful wonder, through Gilbert, and reading them graven in his face and in his life, she had first pondered the problems it presents; but there was a difference. Then, with a gentle boldness and a pure faith she had dreamed that the mysteries might become plain, the walls of mist and fog which closed her avenues be pierced. Now, she knew it would never be

so. She was patient, but patient not because she saw, but because she was blind; and submission, absolute and unquestioning, was the wisdom life had taught her. Others might solve the problems, others find the keys—she had neither the arrogance nor the presumption to believe that where she owned herself defeated they might not succeed—but not she. What had once seemed possibilities now wore the garb of impossibilities, yet of impossibilities which had once been possible. The fortresses were now impregnable, the portcullis lowered, the drawbridge raised, but entrance had once been possible. Now, if she was ever to enter those doors and discover those secrets, ever to comprehend the justice God deals out to men, she knew it would be not in this life, but in some shadowy and spiritual future. For the present she did not rebel, but her very acquiescence was the sign and seal of her defeat.

‘Miss Carrington,’ some one said, looking at her this afternoon as she moved amongst her guests—it was the painter Paul Vassall with whom she had been acquainted at Nice, and who, staying at present in the neighbourhood, had made his way over to Nortons—‘Miss Carrington has lived too long amongst shadows ; she is becoming a beautiful ghost herself—more unsubstantial every day. A little flesh and blood has its advantages.’

Mr. Paul Vassall had lately had a fortune left to him, and having consequently forsaken art, married and settled down in life, he spoke with just the slight tinge of asperity not unnaturally belonging to the would-be idealist who, finding himself at last, notwithstanding the aspirations and dreams of his youth, landed with safety and comfort in a world of materialism, still casts occasional glances of half regret back to the land of expectation which he has abandoned for the sake of

the present advantages of the fleshpots of Egypt.

‘I was in love with her once myself—for five minutes,’ he added meditatively, to the listener to whom he was addressing himself with the confidential candour belonging to his class.

He shrugged his shoulders as he spoke, and turned to make his way towards the circle which surrounded Lady Ralston. Patricia, though he would have scorned to acknowledge it, was a more congenial companion to the present Mr. Vassall than her sister.

It was not a large party. Patricia’s invitations had been select rather than numerous. The Courtneys were of course there, with Dorothy Verschoyle, now nearly grown up and become tall and slim, though otherwise little changed, with the same pale hair and precise manners. Cyril, as usual, was spending his time for the most part near Eve.

People had grown tired of speculating about the two, and even Lady Courtney had begun to acquiesce reluctantly in the terms upon which they stood, having never—according to her son's express request—heard of his attempt to alter them.

‘Let us go back to the past,’ he had said to Eve, not long after that attempt had been made. ‘Try to forget that unlucky episode, and then there may be a chance that I shall forget it too.’

Eve had willingly fallen in with his suggestion. Whether he had forgotten, nobody but Sir Cyril himself knew.

The Erskines, too, were there, and General Cartwright's loud dictatorial tones made themselves heard from time to time above the buzz of voices. Just now as Miss Carrington, her duties for the moment over, was leaning back in her chair listening half amused, half absent, to Courtney's comments upon those present,

his voice caught her ear, and she lost the thread of her companion's remarks.

Patricia looked up as Vassall approached, and greeted him with a cordiality suggestive of the suspicion that an excuse for turning from the country neighbours with whom she had been keeping up a somewhat languid conversation was not unwelcome.

‘Ah, Mr. Vassall,’ she said, ‘it is long since we met. Has life gone well with you since? I hear you are married.’

‘Then is not your question already answered?’ he said, dropping lazily into a chair at her side. ‘I am—as you have been correctly informed—married.’

She raised her eyebrows with a smile in which a dash of insolence mingled with amusement. Patricia had always been careful to regulate her behaviour upon expediency, and it was observable that since her marriage she had allowed herself more latitude

in the matter of manners than before that event.

‘Some people would say that the reply—in these days—is not exhaustive,’ she observed; ‘but no doubt you speak from your own experience.’

Vassall was a little annoyed. His marriage, had he spoken the exact truth, had been so absolute and complete a success that he had a vague sense—though to do him justice it took no definite form or shape—that it might be considered a trifle prosaic and wanting in the elements of excitement and interest which enriched those of less fortunate men. He was, it is true, content; but in this case too, he felt that the land of expectation which he had forsaken had advantages of its own, incompatible with the peace and security of his present position. It was, perhaps, the unacknowledged reflection which lent a certain sharpness to his retort.

‘Of course our views on these subjects *are* based, to some extent at least, upon personal experience,’ he observed smoothly, with a glance that suggested the idea that Lady Ralston’s might have been less fortunate than his own. ‘In each case, however, it is, by the nature of it, limited.’

Patricia was quite undisconcerted, though she did not attempt to ignore his insinuation.

‘Ah, life always goes well with me,’ she said gaily. ‘I have elevated happiness into an art, and I flatter myself it is one in which I excel.’

Mr. Erskine had sauntered up a few minutes before, and had caught her last words, though ignorant of their special application.

‘There are better things than happiness,’ he observed, speaking once more not altogether unprofessionally. Patricia shook her head and laughed.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Of course it is your duty to tell us so, but even you do not believe it.’

It is only as to the kind best worth having that we differ. In one form or another it is the only thing worth living for, and we all think so.'

'Do we?' he said, half sighing. 'Then some of us must confess that life is a failure.'

Mr. Vassall answered for her.

'That,' he said, 'Lady Ralston would tell you, is because we do not manage our affairs well, and she is right in the main. Success and failure mean the same thing, provided we do not know when we are beaten. Success may be summed up in one attribute—a bad memory. What does it after all signify that our best friend is lying dead in the next room, if only the wall is thick enough between us?'

He spoke with a touch of sarcasm, yet somewhat at random. He was, in fact, thinking not so much of what he was saying, as of certain words of Eve's, suddenly recalled to

him, in which she, too, had once professed her belief that life was a failure, and remembering his conviction that she had given utterance, perhaps unconsciously, to the result of a personal experience. Looking across at her now with a revival of the interest he had felt at the time, he was sure that he had been right. Moved by a sudden impulse, he rose and crossed the room. He had perceived that she was for the moment alone, and that the opportunity was favourable for putting his conviction to the test. He came up, and bending over her, spoke in his usual smooth, well-modulated voice, pitched so as to reach her ear alone.

‘Do you remember, Miss Carrington—yet why should you?—I should rather say *I* remember that it is just two years since we met last. I was recalled suddenly to England the very day after I had the pleasure of dining at your sister’s.’

He was looking at her closely, and he fancied, but was not sure, that her face lost a little colour. She made no reply.

‘Do you remember,’ he went on, ‘it——’

She interrupted him, not hurriedly, but with a certain strain in her voice.

‘It,’ she said—‘it is a long time ago.’

Her hands had been lying loosely together on her knee. He noticed, with the observant eye of an artist, that for a moment they were locked together, then fell apart.

‘Too long for you to remember?’ he questioned quietly, still observing her. ‘*I* recollect that evening well. You were tired, Miss Carrington; the heat had knocked you up. You——’

He stopped. The girl had risen and stood resting her hand upon a table near, whilst she looked straight at him, a strange blank expression in her blue eyes.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said; ‘you will

excuse me, Mr. Vassall. I—Lady Courtney——’

She smiled mechanically as she turned and moved away to where, at a little distance, Lady Courtney sat. Vassall stood still a moment watching her, surprised and half repentant. His test, he felt, had answered beyond his hopes, but he did not feel proud of his success. He was moving with the intention of rejoining Lady Ralston, when he stopped short.

The door had opened, and some one stood on the threshold, looking before him uncertainly, as if dazzled and blinded by the sudden light. When Vassall’s glance fell upon him some of the guests had already seen him, not knowing who he was; others had recognised him, but no one came forward to meet him. Even Erskine, startled and taken by surprise, remained where he was at the farther end of the room, whilst Dorothy uttered a low cry

under her breath. General Cartwright alone moved forward with an indistinct sense that it was his duty, in the absence of any male representative of the house, to confront and interrogate the intruder.

Eve, standing with her back to the door, was almost the last to be aware of the new comer's presence. She had just taken an empty cup from Lady Courtney's hands, when she became conscious of the hush that had fallen upon the room, broken only by General Cartwright's voice, and turning quickly, saw the stranger still standing motionless in the doorway. The next moment the cup had fallen shattered to the ground, as Gilbert's name broke from her lips; she had sprung forward and was in his arms.

Neither spoke. In the room, too, there was dead silence. The clatter of voices had ceased, and only the great clock in the corner counted out the seconds. Cyril Courtney had turned

abruptly away with a low muttered word, and stood looking out into the gathering darkness. No one noticed him. The attention of all was riveted on the two. Perhaps ten seconds passed before Eve turned, still not moving from where she stood close to his side, and faced them.

However it might be with him, even at that moment, when for one brief breathing-space and whatever might come after, the longing and the patience of years had found rest and fulfilment, *she* had not forgotten that the man she loved stood face to face with his accusers, with the world which had judged and condemned him, had flung his past in his face and bade him stand apart from it. Rather the consciousness that it was so, and that now at last it was granted to her openly, in the sight of that world, to range herself upon his side, thrilled her through every nerve and fibre. The sight of General Cartwright,

silenced and dismayed, the question she had overheard arrested on his lips, was not needed to remind her that once again Gilbert stood at the bar. Her face, as she lifted it and confronted the curious spectators, was lit with a fire they had never seen there before, as if a beautiful dead mask were suddenly flushed with life and colour. Her voice, low as it was, thrilled and rang through the room.

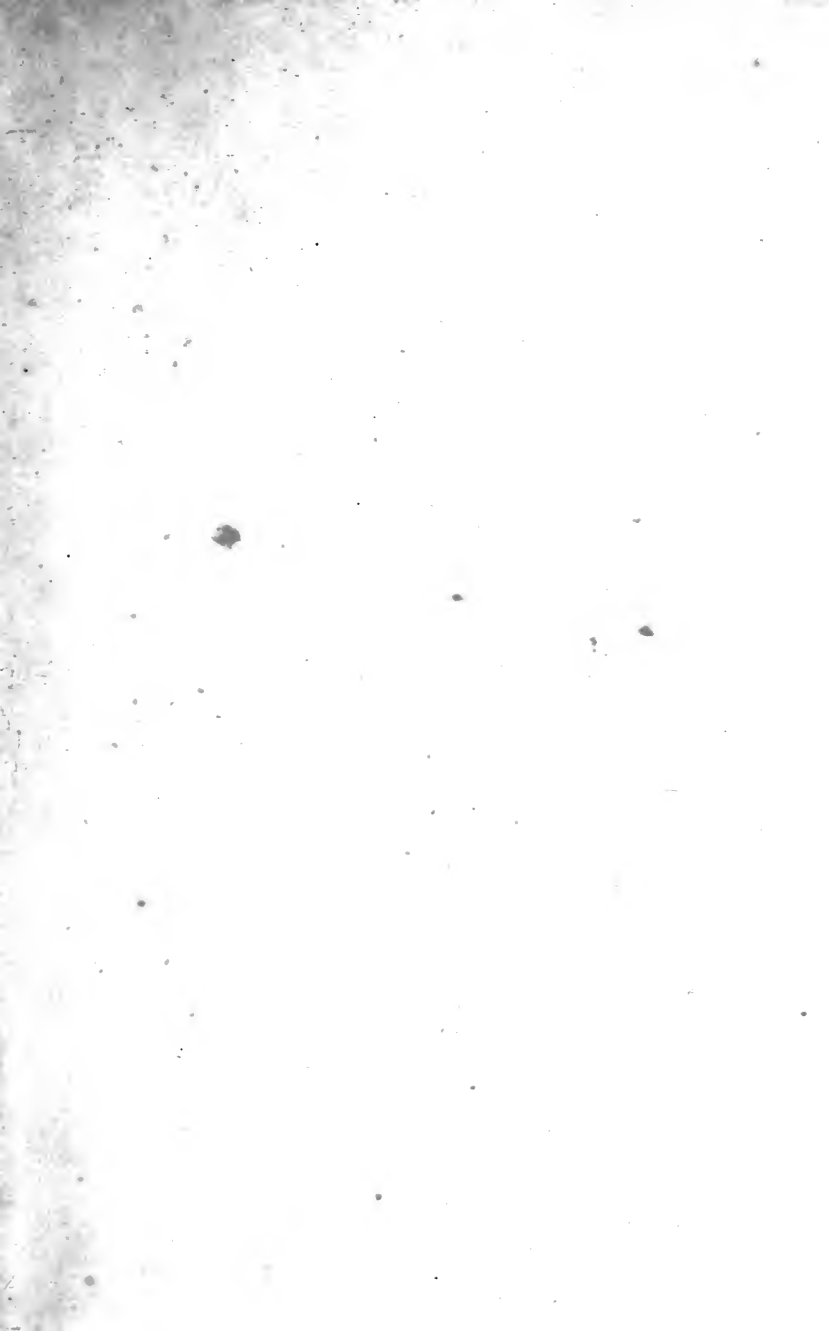
‘You have asked him why he is here,’ she said; she was addressing General Cartwright, but her eyes flashed beyond him, over the rest. ‘You have asked him why he is here.’ For a moment it seemed that she would have taken the reply upon herself; then she broke off. ‘Answer them, Gilbert,’ she said—as once again she turned to him indignation and scorn died out and were forgotten—‘answer them, Gilbert; at last. Tell them what you would not let me tell

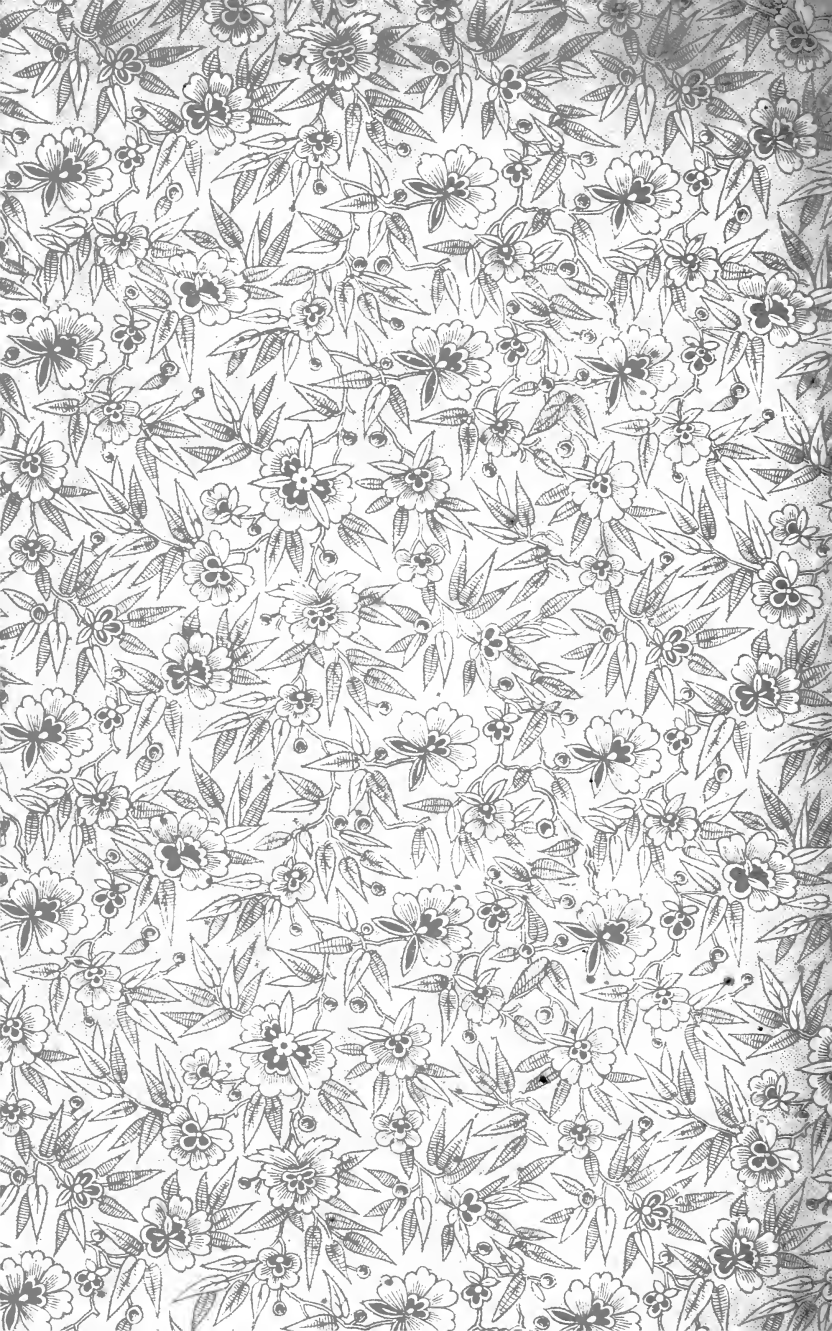
them; tell them why you are here—say it is because I loved you.'

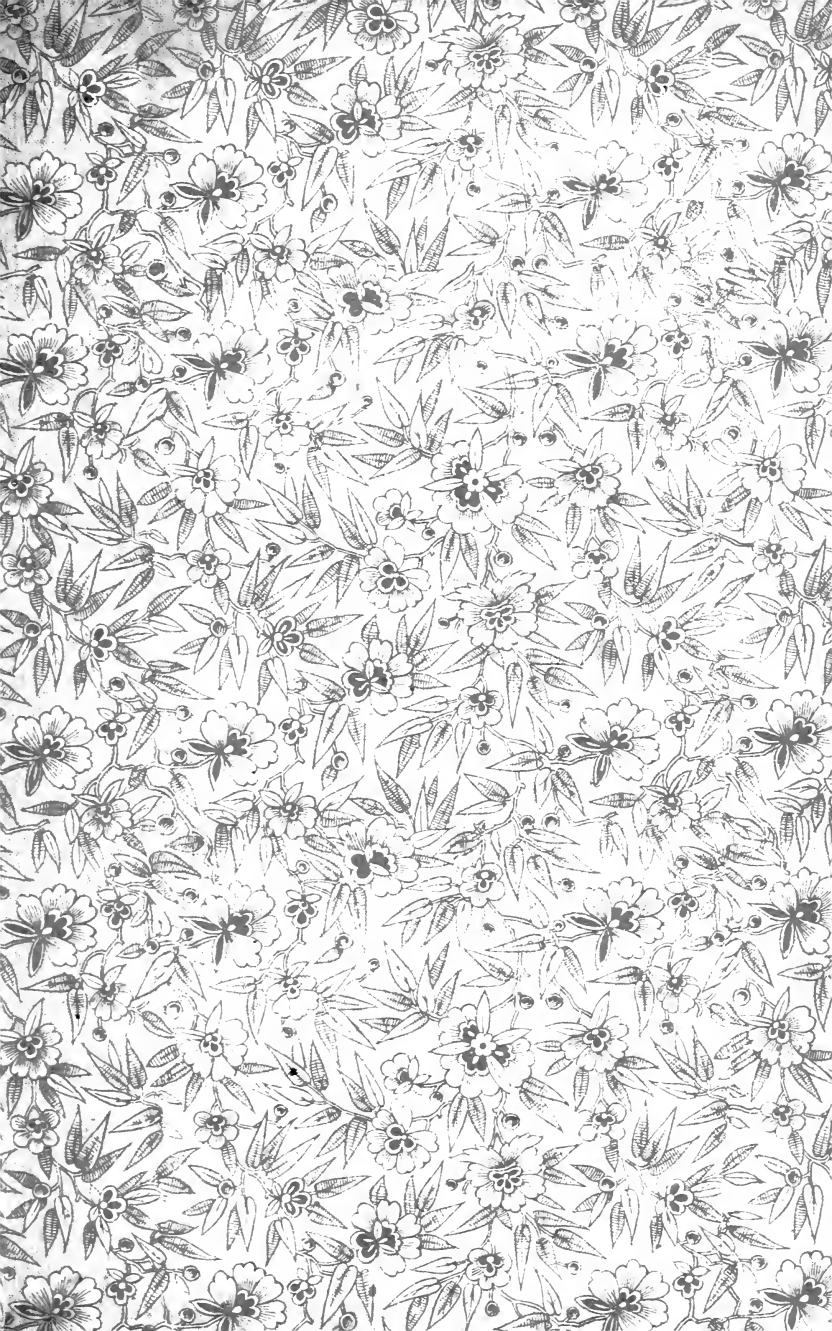
And so we leave them. Disgraced, guilty, condemned—he is all three; nothing is changed. Yet the world, in spite of itself, sometimes at least must needs confess that the old poet was right, and that in these latter days no less than when he said it first,

‘Love doth sing
As sweetly in a beggar as a king.’

THE END.







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